

What the Irish Church could learn from the recent history of the Church in Holland?

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What could the Irish Church learn from the Dutch Church? Answered rather cynically – she can certainly learn from the Dutch Church how to collapse in a few years! However, she can also learn from her how to react to that. For the crisis which first broke out in the Dutch Church, is now everywhere visible in the universal Church, not alone in the entire Western world, but also in other places. It took the Dutch Church, though, many years, before she learned how to cope.

The first question that could arise, when listening to this introduction, might be: how was it possible that such a solid edifice or structure, at least on the outside, could collapse in such short a time? For an answer to this question, many blame the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which they feel caused the Church to ‘break adrift’. One sometimes hears people sigh: had that Council never taken place, we would not have had such ‘headaches’. However, that is a mistake. The first signs of an impending collapse were already perceptible decades before the Council.

The preceding history

Some had already observed an emerging crisis of faith among Catholics in the 1920s and 30s. Alphons Ariëns, the founder of the Catholic Social Movement in The Netherlands at the end of the 19th century, observed in the 1920s, that the general knowledge of their faith was quite deficient among Catholics.¹ And the blessed Titus Brandsma, professor of philosophy of the Catholic University of Nijmegen, when he became Rector-Magnificus of the University in 1931, dedicated his inaugural allocution to the fact many people in The Netherlands were becoming atheists.²

The first clear and undeniable signs of the impending collapse of the Dutch Church became perceptible in the second half of the 1940s. On Sunday 9th October 1947 a group of nine priests and lay people gathered in the minor-seminary of the Archdiocese of Utrecht. They were concerned by what they called a certain ‘tiredness’ in pastoral care since the end of the Second World War. They published the results of their deliberations in a book with a revealing title: *Orrust in de zielzorg*,

¹ H. LOHMAN, *Portret van een priester. Het leven van Alphons Ariëns in woord en beeld*, Hilversum 1980, 169-171.

² H. NOTA, *Titus Brandsma onder ons*, Bolsward 2003, 81

“Unrest in the care of souls.”³ This book clearly shows that the earthquake, caused by the tsunami of revolutions that were to affect the Church during the 1960s, could already be felt in the forties.

In the book mentioned above, the authors observe that

“According to the ultimate data, 38% call themselves Catholic. Many of them certainly participate in the organized exterior community of the Church, but the reality of this participation does not affect the essence of their lives. They are the mighty troops which prepare the enormous apostasy in the near future, a slow process of germinating.”⁴

Some already foresaw in the forties that the churches would soon be empty. Dutch Catholics still went to Church every Sunday, but their practice was “no longer religious, but profane; not dogmatic, but ethical-moral”.⁵ They participated in the community of the Church in a social sense, but with little regard to the Catholic faith as such. There is a surprising witness to this phenomenon, Karol Wojtyła, later Pope John Paul II. In writing of his journey to The Netherlands in 1947, he admires the organization and activities of the Dutch Church. However, he also signalled that the Church in The Netherlands, was “stubborn” in her opposition to Protestantism. He described her as “a quite cold and hard unity,” in which satisfying religious and emotional desires did not matter. “The only thing that matters, is the experience of unity.”⁶ He didn’t find, among Dutch Catholics, a personal faith in Christ and a personal life of prayer.

It is striking that Benedict XVI observed something similar, during his visit to his fatherland 64 years later in 2011:

“The Church in Germany is superbly organized. But behind the structures, is there also a corresponding spiritual strength, the strength of faith in the living God? We must honestly admit that we have more than enough by way of structure but not enough by way of Spirit. I would add: the real crisis facing the Church in the western world is a crisis of faith. If we do not find a way of genuinely renewing our faith, all structural reform will remain ineffective.”⁷

In the forties, notwithstanding the impressive façade of the Church, the majority of Dutch Catholics did not have a faith which was of significance for everyday life. This is the beginning of secularization: those who do not see the importance of faith for

³ Vgl. H. BOELAARS, G. DE GIER, J. VAN DER HOEVEN, A. LUTTERMAN, C. MOONEN, A.C. RAMSELAAR, J.N. VAN ROSMALEN, G. SMIT, F. THIJSEN, J.J.M. VAN DER VEN, J. VERMEULEN, *Orrust in de zielzorg*, Utrecht/Brussel 1949.

⁴ J.N. van Rosmalen, “Verveemding van de Kerk,” in: H. Boelaars, et al., *Orrust in de zielzorg*, op. cit., p. 21.

⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

⁶ Karol Wojtyła, “Koppig katholicisme (=cattolicesimo testardo, E),” *Kerkelijke Documentatie* 30 (2002), pp. 277-285, quotazione presa da p. 283; questo testo è stato scoperto per caso in un archivio di un giornalista polacco e amico di Karol Wojtyła nel 1999 e tradotto da D. Wienen; cf. D. Wienen, “Jonge Wojtyła prijst ‘koppige’ Nederlandse katholieken,” *Kerkelijke Documentatie* 30 (2002), pp. 381-382.

⁷ Benedict XVI, Discorso during meeting with representatives of orthodox and oriental orthodox churches (*Seminary*, Freiburg im Breisgau, 24 settembre 2011), veda: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110924_orthodox-freiburg.html.

daily life, run the risk of losing it sooner or later. For many Catholics only a social bond with the Church remained: they simply belonged to the Catholic community, went to Catholic schools, Catholic scouting, Catholic football or other sporting clubs or were members of Catholic professional associations. Moreover, practically all voted for the Catholic Popular Party, which was for that reason the biggest party in Parliament and had 32% of the seats in 1963. Until breathing one's last, one belonged to some Catholic association.

Because personal faith and spirituality were lacking and Catholics only had a social bond with the Church, it is not surprising that the impressive outer appearance of the Church collapsed in a few years. This came about because of the particular cultural changes of the sixties, especially the rise of the present culture among young people. This concerns what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor so eloquently called, the "culture of expressive individualism and the culture of authenticity."⁸

This culture exists up to the present day and has indeed become deeper and stronger. In this culture social relationships and active participation in communities, do not have priority. In this new situation, with the Church reduced to a mainly social structure in which many members lacked a personal lived faith in Christ, collapse was inevitable. Incidentally, one saw the same development in the main Protestant churches. Less, however, in the smaller orthodox-protestant churches, though in the last decade, secularization has also set in there.

The rise of this new individualistic culture is due to the very fast growth of prosperity in The Netherlands in the first half of the sixties. Prosperity enabled people to live quite independently from one another and so they did. Expressive individualism implies that the individual puts himself at the center of everything and views the environment as a kind of stage on which he can manifest his own authenticity, presumed or not. Other people are considered as spectators. Society mainly functions as a community of interests, necessary because some interests are only realizable together with other people. Every individual has to distinguish himself in his appearance, convictions and his own set of ethical values. He has to design his own life project, including an ideology or religion, an individual view of man and the choice of his own values and norms. Besides, many people fail to notice that their ideas and choices are determined by the mass media, the social media and the world of advertising. What counts is that one *feels* himself to be an autonomous and authentic individual. Because every individual has not only the right, but even the obligation to be himself and to design his own views and values, to criticize these is indecent. Taylor observes that the only sin which is not tolerated is intolerance.⁹ In this culture, the individual, taking himself as point of reference, has no need to refer to a transcendent God, or a community like the Church, which is essentially a community of faithful people.

In this framework not much room is left for common convictions. Postmodern culture therefore leaves undecided the question of what is true? The answer to this is given by the individual. The consequences are indifference in the field of religion, ideology

⁸ Ch. Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*, Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 79-107.

⁹ Ch. Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*, Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 79-107.

and politics. The culture of expressive individualism and the culture of authenticity are the most important base of the “morbid relativism”¹⁰ and of the “unlimited pluralism”¹¹ of the actual culture in the Western world, according to Taylor.

Some statistics and some reorganization measures

Passing on Christian faith in such a culture is by no means an easy job. Without exaggerating, I dare to say that this culture is present in my land in an extreme measure. Together with former East-Germany, The Netherlands is the most secularized country in Europe. Between 1966 and 2006 the percentage of Catholics dropped from 35% to 16% and that of Protestants from 25% to 14%.¹² And these developments will not stop at this point: on the basis of statistical estimates, one expects that by 2010, only 10% of the population will still be Catholic and 4% Protestant. Consequently, by 2020, Islam, with 8%, will be the second religion in The Netherlands. 72% of the population will have no denomination.¹³ These statistics are based on enquiries in which one asks people to what religion they belong. According to the numbers of Catholics in our Baptismal registers the percentages are twice as high. This difference shows that many baptized Catholics do not identify themselves as such any more. All this reflects the immense decline of the Catholic Church in The Netherlands in recent times.

Between 2007 and 2011 all the existing parishes of the Archdiocese of Utrecht were merged into 48 parishes. I added just one new parish, a students' parish in the city of Utrecht. The merger process was imposed by the Archdiocese. Otherwise, it would not have taken place. Afterwards even some of the big parishes which were the result of the merger process, were further merged with one another, so that we now have 46 parishes. The reason for the merger process was the lack of priests. Before it happened, there was one priest who had 13 original parishes. As every parish council has at least 10 meetings a year, this meant that he had 130 meetings of parish councils each year. This was consuming precious time he needed for his pastoral activities. We now have 63 active priests for 750,000 nominal Catholics and still circa 250 churches, whereas we had almost 400 in the past. This low number of active priests made the merger of the parishes necessary. As well as which, it turned out to be difficult to find enough qualified members for the parish councils.

The merger process gave me the possibility to give every member of the pastoral teams a new nomination, which allowed me the possibility to remediate a situation gone awry. In more than half of the cases the leader of the pastoral team was a lay pastoral worker. In The Netherlands this is somebody with the same theological formation as priests, working either in a parish or an institute (hospital, prison) with a pastoral mission from the bishop. In giving new nominations to everybody, I did not appoint any of the members as team leader, assuming that the leader of the team is the parish priest from both a theological viewpoint and that of canon law.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 89.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 101.

¹² T. Bernts, G. Dekker, J. de Hart, *God in Nederland 1996-2006*, Kampen: Ten Have, 2007, p. 14.

¹³ J. Becker, J. de Hart, *Godsdienstige veranderingen in Nederland. Verschuivingen in de binding met de kerken en de christelijke traditie*, Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2006, p. 53.

Moreover, among the new parishes in 2011, I designated some as 'Eucharistic Centers' – churches where the Eucharist is always celebrated. Since there are not enough priests to celebrate the Eucharist in each church every Sunday, by creating Eucharistic Centers I intended to give the priests a kind of home. I also wanted to prevent what often happened, that on Sundays, a lay pastoral worker celebrated a Service of the Word and Communion in one of the bigger churches of the parish for hundreds of the faithful, while a priest was celebrating Eucharist for 10 or 20 people in a small church elsewhere.

In the Archdiocese of Utrecht by 2020 around one third of all the churches will be closed down and before 2025 circa two thirds of them. The parish councils, knowing the local situations well, make the proposal for the closing down of churches, which is then submitted to me. Were I not to withdraw churches from divine cult, many parishes would go bankrupt. The reasons are a lack of active faithful and a resulting lack of financial means. The Dutch Church depends on voluntary contributions by the faithful. There are no church taxes like in Germany and elsewhere. At present, two or three churches are closed down each week in The Netherlands, 60% Protestant and 40% Catholic.

By the end of 2014, I published a letter outlining my view of the future of parishes in the archdiocese.¹⁴ Several members of pastoral teams had asked me for this. I am no prophet, but I did not need much imagination to express my expectations for the year 2028. I chose that year, because by then, I will have reached the age of 75 years and will be obliged to offer my retirement to the Holy Father. I wrote in that letter of 2014, to expect that by the time of my retirement, the Archdiocese of Utrecht will have only 20 parishes, each with one or two churches. Incidentally, some priests said to me that my letter is too optimistic about the future!

The whole media in The Netherlands, plus a Foundation which tried to block the closing down of churches as well as some elderly priests, took offence at my letter on the future of the Archdiocese and protested loudly against it. The directive committee of the Foundation mentioned, travelled to Rome in the first week of December 2013, while the Dutch bishops were there on their Ad Limina visit. It presented reports about what they saw as the destruction of some dioceses, among which my Archdiocese featured, in an attempt to set the Pope, the diverse dicasteries of the Roman Curia and the media, against the bishops involved.

On the day that all of the Dutch bishops were to meet the Pope, the atmosphere was very tense. Because of the information spread by the Foundation many journalists expected the Pope to reproach the Dutch bishops for closing down churches. After the meeting with the Pope, when leaving by the Bronze Door of the Apostolic Palace, we saw a big group of journalists, some with cameras rolling, awaiting us. However, they saw immediately by our relieved faces, that the meeting with the Pope had gone well. In my introductory speech, I had told the Pope how many churches we had to close down. The reaction of the Pope, understanding our situation, was, briefly

¹⁴ Eijk W.J., "Het geloof in Christus vieren en verbreiden in het derde decennium van de 21ste eeuw (23 november 2014)," see: <https://www.aartsbisdom.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2014-11-21-Toekomstperspectieven-voor-parochies-definitief-site.pdf>.

summarized: “Avanti, avanti, (‘go further’), do not look back in nostalgia to what you had in the past. Avanti!’”

The active priests, deacons and lay pastoral workers of the diocese, recognized the reality of the situation which I had described in my letter on the future of the parishes in my Archdiocese and applied its recommendations. After that, a hierarchical appeal to the Congregation of the Clergy, against my decision to close down one of the churches of my Archdiocese, was lost by the people who took the initiative. Following this reversal, the Association opposing the closing down of churches became silent. The parishes in the Archdiocese and even parishes in other Dutch dioceses, continue to apply the recommendations of the letter mentioned above.

Can the Irish Church learn something from the Dutch Church?

This having been said, let us now return to the question for which you originally invited me: can the Irish Church learn anything from the Dutch Church? Obviously, the present Irish culture is still not as hyper-individualistic as the Dutch culture has become, but an individualism is nevertheless also present in Ireland and affects the Irish Church too. I cannot claim, of course, to provide the panacea or universal remedy for the problems of the Church in other countries. Nor am I claiming that I mention things which are totally new to you. However, I believe that my experience as a Dutch bishop has taught me some things which are of importance, things that may also be useful to you. Useful, in order to guarantee as much as possible, that the Church can continue the mission she received from her Founder and Lord, Jesus Christ, who commands to her through the apostles:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time” (Mt. 28,18-20).

Of course, the future of the Church is in the first place in God’s hand, but we are supposed to collaborate with God’s grace and put all of our human capacities into service in our efforts to proclaim the Gospel.

I would like to mention three things here which represent very different levels, but seem to be me of paramount importance. First, take care to maintain your financial reserves at all costs. Secondly, ensure excellent formation and preparation of your collaborators. Thirdly, but this should in fact be the first thing – take care of your own spirituality and that of others.

The *first* point that I mentioned may perhaps sound quite superficial or even coarse. However, as I said to you, I can only speak on the basis of my own experience. When Pope Benedict transferred me from the diocese of Groningen to the Archdiocese of Utrecht and therefore nominated me Metropolitan Primate of The Netherlands, many complimented me on this ‘promotion’. However, I instantly became the poorest bishop in The Netherlands! A few days after my nomination, I met with the economist of the Archdiocese, who confronted me with the not exactly glad tidings, that the Archdiocese would be technically bankrupt in a year and a half,

if I did nothing to prevent it. It may sound flat, as I said above, but it was my first concern at that moment. When the Church cannot pay its bills any more, you do not have to discuss which lector will do the first or the second reading. You know one thing for certain – the last reading will be done by the bailiff!

In order to restore the financial situation of the diocese to a healthy state I had to dismiss two thirds of the personnel of the diocesan curia and the deaneries, which all had their own offices. These contained many salaried lay pastoral workers for developing catechetical, diaconal and organizational programs. By the way, these were barely used in the parishes. Because the deaneries were juridical persons, I had to suppress the five deaneries and to replace them by regional vicariates, so that their personnel could be dismissed. The mass media frequently reported on this in a negative way. It was not a very pleasant beginning and the person doing this job, is not going to be very popular. I was reported to be a cold bishop, without any empathy, interested only in money, without faith in God's assistance, who did not listen to the advice of other people etc. However, the Archdiocese is now economically healthy and nobody talks about the money Bishop anymore.

Currently, we as members of the diocesan staff, are occupying ourselves with the financial situations of our parishes. 10% of the parishes are extremely rich, 10% of the parishes are practically bankrupt and 80% have a deficit, sometimes extremely large, in their budgets. In 2011 and 2012 the diocesan staff received each of the parish councils in the bishop's house for a meeting, a dinner and a guided tour of the bishop's house. We encouraged them to try to restore the parish finances to a healthy situation and asked them to draw up both a pastoral plan and a plan for their buildings. Afterwards, the economist and the vice-economist of the archdiocese visited all the parish priests, together with the vice-president and the treasurer of the parish council and they still regularly do so, in order to stimulate them to prevent the parish from being in the red.

The parishes involved are now trying to make their budgets healthy by not nominating successors to lay pastoral workers who retire. A lay pastoral worker costs more than €70,000 a year and many parishes cannot afford that any more. In 2010, I decided not to ordain any more salaried permanent deacons, because the bishop has the obligation to care for them and grant them a salary and I can foresee that that will not be possible in the near future. Parishes also sometimes have to dismiss their organists, choir directors, secretaries and other personnel

The second important way for parishes to restore their finances to healthy condition is to ask the bishop to close one or more of their churches. The parish in Apeldoorn closed 6 of its 7 churches, Huissen is doing the same, Arnhem closed down 8 of its 11 churches, Doetinchem 4 of its 8 and Ulfst 8 of its 11 churches. If this had not happened, the parishes would have gone bankrupt, many in a short time. When hearing all these statistics, you may perhaps conclude that my vision of the future of the Archdiocese was not so mad as you first might have thought.

The *second thing*, I would like to observe is the solid formation of the collaborators of the diocese and the parishes.

In 2009 I had to close down the archdiocesan seminary because of a lack of financial means and a shortage of seminarians. Fortunately, due to a modest rise in their numbers, I was able to reopen the seminary in 2014. Our seminarians study at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, 'TST', the result of a merger of a Catholic theological faculty in Utrecht and one in Tilburg. It is a faculty of Tilburg University, but is situated in Utrecht because of the location of the seminary. The TST, founded at the start of 2007, was recognized by the Holy See from its very beginning. I had been closely involved on behalf of the Dutch Bishops' Conference, while still bishop of Groningen, as Referent for ecclesiastical studies. By becoming Archbishop of Utrecht, according to the statutes, I became at the same moment the Grand-Chancellor of the TST. This gives me a special responsibility concerning the nomination of teachers and professors, to whom I have to give a canonical mission as well as having to apply for a nihil obstat for them from the Holy See. We are now collaborating with the dioceses of Breda and Rotterdam for the priestly formation of our seminarians. We also accept students from the diocese of Groningen in our seminary. A remarkable thing about the seminary is that quite a number of our seminarians claim to have discovered their vocation in Lourdes. Because the Archdiocese has a widespread and deep veneration for the Mother of God, the Holy Virgin Mary, and one should always try to make use of still existing ways of making people more deeply acquainted with the Gospel, since 2009 the Archdiocese has organized big pilgrimages to Lourdes every three years, with between 1,000 and 1,500 participants. I hope and pray that through the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes, we will have more seminarians.

In my letter about the future of the parish, published in 2014, I said to expect that after ten years the only salaried person in the parish would be the priest. As has been mentioned above, the number of salaried lay pastoral workers is going down very quickly. Their number in the parishes has been halved. They were most active in catechesis, diaconal activities and efforts to build up the parish as a community of faithful. The number of paid permanent deacons will also drop in the near future. However, others have to take over their work. The priest cannot do everything by himself, especially since the parishes in the Archdiocese are now very large, many as big or even bigger than the 23 original deaneries which the Archdiocese had until the nineties.

The Archdiocese has therefore started and is still starting, new training and schooling for voluntary collaborators. We began with a training of three years for catechetical collaborators with a mission from the bishop. The first group completed this training in June of last year. Last September, we started a three year training course for diaconal assistants. We start every training day with the celebration of the Eucharist, so that the participants become familiar with this sacrament. Among other things, the catechetical collaborators have to prepare children for their first Holy Communion and adolescents for Confirmation. We aim at what we call a 'spiritual' catechesis that helps children, adolescents and adults to develop a personal relationship with Jesus and a personal life of prayer. In the same sense, the diaconal assistants should not consider diaconal activities as simply 'doing good things for people', but view them as stemming from their life of prayer and the celebration of the Eucharist. For the same reason we stipulate that diaconal activities are done in and from the Eucharistic Centers, the churches in the parishes where the Eucharist is always celebrated. An

additional reason for this is that the Eucharistic Centers are the churches which will most probably survive into the future.

As well as these developments, we will start in September of this year, a schooling of four years for unpaid, voluntary, permanent deacons. We have very few vocations for this ministry and the candidates that we had, stopped their schooling, because this was given in an institute of a distant diocese. We hope and pray that by offering our own schooling for permanent deacons locally, we will soon have more candidates for this precious ministry.

The *third point* I would like to discuss concerns taking care of a good spirituality. When priests, deacons or lay pastoral workers 'run aground' in their work, we often find out that they have no spiritual guide or confessor. For priests, deacons or lay pastoral workers, a fixed priest with whom they regularly talk about their inner self, the inner part of their souls and their moral conscience, is totally indispensable. The seminarians regularly visit one of the two spiritual directors of the seminary. But we also insist in the case of candidate permanent deacons and those who participate in the training to become a catechetical collaborator or diaconal assistant, that they also have a spiritual guide and confessor. By the way, this is very much recommended for every member of the faithful.

The recent history of the Dutch Church highlights the importance of having a solid spirituality, an inner life led by the Holy Spirit, through Whom we have a personal relationship with Jesus. In spite of her beautiful and impressive façade and strong organization, the Dutch Church collapsed in a short time due to the rise of the present culture of expressive individualism and authenticity. This breakdown occurred, precisely because it was an empty social structure, in which the important content, a true Christian spirituality, was lacking.

You have put to me the question as to what you can learn from the Dutch Church, but perhaps my final answer to this question should be: just look at what we learned from you, around 1,300 years ago. North-Western Europe was not Christianized from Rome, but from Ireland and Scotland. The Iro-Scottish monks brought the faith in Christ to the North-Western part of the European continent. In The Netherlands, the Romans founded some Christian churches in the cities. Saint Servatius brought the Christian faith to Maastricht in the fourth century and there was a small Christian church from Roman times in the city of Utrecht. But the important missionaries were Saint Willibrord and his companions, who came to our country by the end of the seventh century. Willibrord founded the episcopal see of Utrecht and was ordained archbishop of the Friesians by Pope Sergius I in 695. I am his seventieth successor.

Saint Willibrord was an English Monk, originating from York, but he received his formation as monk during 12 years in the monastery of Rathmelsighi, in the neighborhood of Dublin. He was therefore solidly formed in the tradition of the Iro-Scottish spirituality. I always promote this spirituality in homilies and conferences on Saint Willibrord, because I find it very apposite for our present culture.¹⁵ What is the essence of this spirituality and in what way could it be meaningful for our time?

¹⁵ Eijk W.J., "Willibrord: voorbeeld en inspiratiebron voor onze tijd? (Vleuten, Torenpleinkerk, 7 november 2012," see: <https://www.aartsbisdom.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Vleuten-Willibrord-2012-11-07.pdf>; IDEM, "Predigt von Kardinal Eijk bei der feierlichen Eröffnungsandacht (17th May 2016),"

The Iro-Scottish monks had a very special ascetic-mystic ideal. They were deeply conscious that they were not shepherds by their own authority, but that they participated in the pastorate of Christ. They took this very literally, in the sense that they intended to give shape to their lives according to His life. Jesus did not possess anything, had nowhere to lay his head (Mt. 8,20) and did not have a permanent home or address, but travelled from one city or village to another, in order to proclaim the Gospel. It was precisely this that the Iro-Scottish monks also wanted – out of love for the people who did not yet know Christ, they wished to give up their human certainties in order to go abroad. It was their ideal to be like Jesus. a “peregrinus,” a pilgrim, in other words, a stranger to bring the people of the European continent into contact with Him. In this way, they intended to give answer to Jesus’ call:

“And everyone who has left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children or land for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times as much, and also inherit eternal life (Mt. 19,29).

Like Jesus, they were not bent on pasturing themselves to benefit from it, but rather, as shepherds, to take care of our ancestors.

The Iro-Scottish monks could not rely on ecclesiastical structures, which had yet to be built. The first missionaries depended mostly on their personal charisma as convincing disciples of Jesus. Their spirituality caught on. Soon missionaries, originating from the continent emerged, inspired by the same fire, such as Saint Ludger, born in the village of Zuilen, now a district of the city of Utrecht.

They experienced what it meant to be a follower of Jesus and that “the disciple is not superior to the Master” (Mt. 10,24). They had the same experiences as Jesus had during His earthly life. They met with incomprehension and resistance. Their monasteries and possession were regularly destroyed.

Obviously, it is not easy to draw analogies between our countries in the first quarter of the 21st century and those between the 7th and 9th centuries. From the viewpoint of the Church, however, there are some clear parallels. When the Iro-Scottish monks began, they could not rely on ecclesiastical structures, which, as we already said, had still to be built up. In the Netherlands since the 1960s, flourishing ecclesiastical structures of the past, schools, universities and hospitals, evaporated or lost their identity in a very short space of time. We now find ourselves in a situation that we cannot rely on big ecclesiastical structures anymore, just like the Iro-Scottish monks when they began to Christianize North-Western Europe.

A second parallel concerns the society in which we have to proclaim the Gospel. The Iro-Scottish monks did that in a pagan society which was not waiting for the Christian faith, whereas we operate in a secular environment,

see: <https://www.cathol.lu/grouss-evenementer-evenements-phares/sprangpressessioun-procession-dansante/9-383-springer-musikanten-beter-und-pralaten-nahmen-2016-an-der-springprozession-teil.html>).

into which pagan ideas have returned or new one's have been introduced. I have in mind various forms of esotery, horoscopes, tarot cards, spiritualism, paranormal phenomena and eastern religions.

A few years ago, somebody wrote to me in an email that we are living in a bleak secular society. For the contemporary secular society Jesus has become a stranger. As contemporary Christians, we do not need to travel to other countries to feel estranged. We can already find ourselves strangers in our own countries. Sometimes, as Christians, we feel more at home in other countries, where believing in Christ is self-evident. Whoever intends to follow Jesus, feels himself a stranger, not understood by his environment. However, it is precisely in a secular world, that people who are open about their faith in Christ and His Gospel, are more than ever needed. If the Iro-Scottish monks hadn't the courage to bring us the Gospel as strangers in the first place, then we would perhaps not have known Christ. It is now our turn to find the courage to be clearly open as strangers, so that our fellow human beings in the present secular society start to know Him and through Him come to the Eternal Father.

Conclusion

The conclusion of my conference can be brief. You asked what the Irish Church can learn from the Dutch Church? In a certain way, I could answer: the same as you taught us some 1,300 years ago.