



CNI

CNI comment -

A time for Christian leadership

In the immediate wake of the referendum in the Republic the responses from the churches rightly came under scrutiny.

The Presbyterian Church had stated its position clearly before the vote through the chairman of its relevant board of the General Assembly. After the vote the same chairman restated the same policy. It was re-stated with the firmness and compassion which nuanced the pre-election communication.

The Roman Catholic bishops to a man, each in his own diocese, had issued pastoral letters to their members. They were all singing from the same hymn sheet. They reflected what is the policy of their church as defined by the Vatican.

The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin in his response after the vote spoke with immense sensitivity about the decision of the electorate. His observation that his church had a major task in communicating to its young people, who had been educated in church schools, displayed a sensitive, measured, criticism of his church which resonated in the understanding of many people including those of other denominations and none.

Even the most casual review of the news media shows that Archbishop Martin came clearly through as a man of God who was trying to keep in touch both with the requirements of his church universally, and the major change in Irish society which the vote incarnated. There was an empathy elicited by him even amongst those who disagreed with his theological stance.

By contrast with their Roman counterparts, the archbishops and bishops of the Church of Ireland did not issue a significant common statement before the vote. It looked as though this was left to a spokesman for a church board

which according to this year's General Synod reports would appear still to be sorting out what is its area of responsibility. Two bishops said they were voting yes and one said their preference was no. But there was no effective communication to the public domain by the bishops corporately of what the stance of the C of I was prior to the vote.

In comparison with the Roman Church whose archbishop's response was promptly available to the media and which fully acknowledged the climate the vote had evoked, the C of I bishops issued one reeking of a 'Blue Peter' approach - a "one we made earlier" statement which would be issued regardless of the outcome of the vote.

Whether or not it was, is now irrelevant. It has been the focus of considerable negative criticism by a significant number of clergy and laity on social media. *(The text of the bishops' statement is carried on CNI's news bulletin of May 23.)*

The last sentence was a too economic and indeed an unnecessarily terse comment which

referred to folk who may regard the vote as a 'triumph' or a 'disaster.'

However - over to the voices on social media.

One seasoned, ordained, church communicator wrote - "Today has been a great day but so disappointed in this response from our House of bishops - On the eve of Pentecost many of us have seen the Spirit move in this land outside the traditional boundaries of the traditional Church but all we can offer in response is a denial of the validity of diversity and a divisive description of the result of the Referendum as a 'disaster'".

Another senior cleric commented, "Not really sure why there needed to be a statement. After all, the Primate told the (*General*) Synod that this was a Civil Matter." "I am dismayed at the final paragraph and the 'dismayed' phrase", added another.

Issued on the day of the Eurovision song contest, the theme surfaced - "That's a very

screwed up press release. It comes across as petty and one sided in its timing and shows that there is a lot of seriously poor judgement among the house of Bishops. In the evening that's in it, "Cof I - Nil Points""

And it kept coming :

"An appalling statement. If the archbishops and bishops felt that they had to make a statement, and had to express the things that they did in that statement, they could have said the same thing but said it differently, i.e. without being condescending."

"I think what disappointed me most about that statement was its tone. Actually I'm not sure that they needed to make a statement at all but if they felt the need it could have been more reflective, spiritual and generous in tone."

"There is not even the grace of the Roman Catholic Church's admission that they have had a "reality check".

Three retired clergy who have held senior posts in the C of I in individual comments stated :

“Dreadful unsympathetic H of Bishops statement. Vote about affirmation, equality of opportunity not who triumphs”

“A negative and unhelpful statement, devoid of compassion, and totally out of touch with the real issues.”

“The Bishops Statement was quite without grace, never mind compassion, in marked contrast to what Archbishop Diarmuid Martin had to say and the way in which he said it.”

“The situation had been well defined that this was about civil marriage - the question of christian marriage being left to the courts of the various churches.”

The bishops of the Church of Ireland were incompetent in their communication - and they ignored the social and civic context in which

their comment was issued. Perhaps with the divisions in the house of bishops, the church and the Anglican Communion, a more sensitive and savy approach was impossible to obtain.

However, to state the obvious, there are times when the better communication is no comment. It is better to be silent than to issue a comment which was terse, gratuitous and totally lacking in reflecting basic fundamentals - Christian love, understanding and compassion.

What is done cannot be undone by the C of I bishops.

The marriage referendum vote will be one of the most major bench marks in the constitutional history of Ireland. What a singular pity that from now on the Church of Ireland in particular will be saddled with the action and result of issuing such an ungracious, incompetently drafted, statement which would appear to have been circulated to the media without any regard to the climate of opinion in the country following the announcement of the results.

The witness of the Church of Ireland has been sullied by those who, beyond all its clerical and lay members, are charged in their episcopal ordination with guarding the Church's standards and effecting in a responsible manner the communication of its witness.

Corporate Christian leadership, courage and compassion - were lacking. This is evidenced in the tone and stance of this communication.

It was left to the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Michael Jackson, to step in to present a more articulate and caring message. (See CNI bulletin today).

What a pity Dr Jackson's remarks were not issued on Saturday.

To state the obvious. The C of I House of Bishops needs to reflect seriously on its corporate communications. An apology to their disappointed clergy and laity would be a good starting place.

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