
Comment -

How ready and willing are we really for a Papal visit?

The hoped-for visit of Pope Francis to Ireland in 2018 is exactly that - hoped for, but by no means certain. What is certain is that Dublin will host the important World Meeting of Families in three years time. This event is usually attended by the Pontiff, which has given rise to the hope that Francis will come to Ireland - writes Alf McCreary

It is significant to note that senior Irish Catholic figures are stressing that it may take some time before Pope Francis makes an official announcement.

A formal invitation was made by Taoiseach Enda Kenny in 2013, but three years is a long time, not only in politics but also in ecclesiastical affairs.

Pope Francis, even with his abundant charisma, is beginning to look frail and three years for a man of his age is a particularly long time.

However, it is better to be optimistic, and, assuming that Pope Francis will visit Ireland, he will be made most welcome in the Republic.

The situation in Northern Ireland may be slightly different, because there will always be people on the Protestant evangelical extremes who will not welcome the visit of any Pope, and will no doubt wish to demonstrate.

When Pope John Paul II came to Ireland almost 40 years ago, the then very hardline Ian Paisley sounded a rasping and unhelpful tone of dissent. Already, invitations are going out to Pope Francis to come north, if he actually makes it to Ireland. Indeed, Belfast City Council has invited him to the capital city.

It is most likely, however, that he will visit Armagh, which is the ecclesiastical capital of the island. Pope John Paul was particularly disappointed that he could not go to Armagh, due to [security](#) reasons, and there is a lingering feeling among the Irish hierarchy and in parts of the Vatican that no Irish tour would be complete without a visit to the site where St Patrick

established the early Christian Church on this island.

Whether or not the Pope comes north will depend on a host of factors, not least the security situation, and political developments which still give cause for concern.

A northern visit would be attractive if power-sharing was seen to be really working by 2018, but a return to direct rule before then would be a setback, and the Pope's advisers might take a harder line concerning a visit to a province which will have shown that it has been unable to govern itself.

A Papal visit to Ireland would undoubtedly be a boost to the beleaguered Irish [Catholic Church](#), which has been losing numbers and respect in a period of strident secularism, and also the continued disgust at the way in which it dealt with the clerical child sex abuse scandals.

Whether or not another Papal visit would make much difference is another matter.

The visit of John Paul II created much euphoria, but his plea to the Provisional IRA to stop their violence fell on deaf ears; and the period since that visit has witnessed an obvious decline within the Irish Catholic Church.

Despite everything, a visit to the Republic and Northern Ireland by Pope Francis would be most welcome, and it would be approved by a large number of Protestants up here.

Those who protest the loudest do not often represent the broad spectrum of Protestantism in Northern Ireland, and thank God for that.

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