Sermon preached by the Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross
The Right Reverend Paul Colton at the Festival and Civic Eucharist in Saint Fin Barre's Cathedral on
Saint Patrick's Day 2011

> 'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.
>
> 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.
>
> *Matthew 5.13-4*

A simple light, a candle, marks the spot in Canterbury Cathedral where the Shrine of Thomas Becket once stood. In 1538 the shrine was destroyed on the orders of King Henry VIII. However, even today, the pink stone in front of that spot still witnesses to the imprints of the kneeling knees of centuries of pilgrims.

Thomas had been made Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162 by King Henry II. As the Facebook generation of today might say, their relationship soon became 'complicated' – very acrimonious in fact. Thomas gave primary loyalty to the Church rather than to the King who appointed him. Everything came to a head in a heated dispute about succession to the throne. Henry is reputed to have uttered those words which resonate through history since: 'Who will rid me of this turbulent/this meddlesome priest?' In response, thinking they were doing the King's will, four Knights murdered Thomas.

I've knelt and prayed at the altar on that very spot, known in Canterbury Cathedral today as the Martyrdom. Above the altar - the altar of the sword's point - is a sculpture. It's a cross with two swords hanging from it – one with a broken sword point: a reminder that one of the knights broke his sword tip when striking a third blow to Becket's skull.

'Who will rid me of this turbulent/meddlesome priest?' This is one of the best-known confrontations between Church and State in history. I choose deliberately to mention it today, following a General Election, and the convening of a new *Dáil*, and in the midst of elections to *Seanad Éireann*.

Why? Well, not because we ever see Church-State disputes in Ireland escalating to that level, but rather, to emphasise, as I did last year, that one of the big debates of coming years, in a number of fields, will undoubtedly be the place religion and faith are to have in Irish society: the relationship between religion and the State.

This is already most keenly seen in very practical issues confronting the education sector. It surfaces from time to time in the healthcare arena. In many other ways, it is on the agenda: in the constitutional debate about blasphemy; and in the call (a healthy one, I believe) of Atheist Ireland for people to be honest about their religion in the forthcoming census, to mention but a couple of examples.

Given the enduring place of religion, albeit in new guises, in the lives of many Irish people; and given the inevitable interface between religion and the State in so many aspects of Irish life, it is astonishing that, every so often, perhaps when a raw nerve is touched, a political voice takes refuge in a weak form of political defence and says that the Church should butt out of State affairs. The suggestion seems to be that the Church is for praying and the State for legislating and that the two should never meet.

I heard this same disconnect purveyed in another medium as recently as two nights ago, in the first of a new BBC 2 series *The Bible's Buried Secrets.* Presenter Dr Francesca Stavrakopoulou ended the first programme with these words: 'Religion speaks to the mysterious part of us: whereas politics speaks to the here and now.' The polarisation of the two hit me. Politics can be pretty mysterious to outsiders. Yes, religion does relate to the numinous, the sacred and the spiritual, but, as Christians we also believe that it transacts with the here and now. Christians are supposed to be preoccupied with passing on the things Jesus taught about building God's kingdom; and about making that kingdom real for people in this time and place. It is this desire to transform in the name of Christ and to serve God's people that motivates and energises Christian people,, as it does so many of you here today involved in NGOs and voluntary work.

If you look at the sheet that was enclosed with your Order of Service today you will see a list of the preoccupations of one Parliament – the General Synod of the Church of Ireland since 1871. In recent months I have, for the third time at one 'sitting' read 143 of these volumes: the Journals of the General Synod. As you can see, it represents the work of no shrinking violet. On the contrary, it shows active engagement, practical concern and a Christian response of one Church to very real issues, local, national and international of the day.

Debate about and models of separation of Church and State are complex, but none of them should be so naïve as to expect a supine Church with nothing to say about temporal matters affecting humanity and life. Some, even politicians and political commentators, chastise the Churches for political engagement and urge retreat to the private, personal sphere. A Christianity that complies and which retreats, like a chastised pet, in such a way is an emasculation of the teaching and life of Jesus Christ. Christians have to be caught up in the life and concerns of human society, if they are to be worth their salt or to be a light. 'You are the salt of the earth…. You are the light of the world.'

A Church that isn't engaged - politically, socially, economically, practically - :

- Forgets that Jesus was born in the muck of poverty at a time of political unrest and that he was a refugee in Egypt.
- Neglects the incarnation, which is all about God sharing our human reality for a time – 'pitching his tent among us', as one translation of St John's Gospel puts it.
- Loses sight of the difference he made to ordinary people in his lifetime, here and now.
- Fails to join the dots between the radical challenge of the teaching of Jesus and what the impact of those teachings might be in our own time.
- Disregards Jesus' own human predicament: his betrayal; his show trial on cooked up political charges; his imprisonment and torture; his rejection and execution;
- Overlooks the hope he restored to people through the Easter experience and encounter.

For our part churches in Ireland, and faiths in general, need to be aware, in away that we have not been before, that we have no exclusive right to occupation of the market place. In today's Ireland and Europe, Christianity shares that forum with other faiths, other ideologies and many languages, cultures and sub-cultures; as well as with people of no religion.

All this is food for thought on this St Patrick's Day when we reflect on the bringing of Christianity to Ireland and when, unavoidably, we have to ask, what is the place of that faith in our country today. The challenge to modern Christians, is best summed up, as always, by the words of Jesus himself:

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