

**Address given by the Right Reverend Dr Paul Colton,  
Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross at a  
Civic Service in St Mary's Cathedral, Limerick  
On Sunday, 21st October 2018**

‘But it is not so among you;  
but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,  
and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.  
For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.’  
~ Mark 5.43-45

Among my box of memories at home is a black and white photograph, bought by my mother from the *Cork Examiner* in March 1976. It shows the Lord Mayor of Cork that year, Alderman Gus Healy, being escorted from St Fin Barre's Cathedral, Cork, accompanied by the then Dean of Cork, Maurice Carey, led by the ceremonial maces of the City of Cork, and followed by the Aldermen and members of Cork Corporation, as it then was. Standing in a guard of honour for them on either side of the great west door of the Cathedral are the leaders and members of the Cathedral Scout Group, including myself, as a slim sixteen year old - with hair.

I remember those Civic Services well. They went back many years. They were notable, remarkable even, at the time, as they marked a breakthrough in what, up until then, had been quite an arid ecumenical air in Cork. The entire Corporation invariably attended with all due pomp and ceremony. Several years later, your Bishop's father-in-law, became our Bishop in Cork, a great mentor and steadfast friend of mine, and I always recall how, as he left the Cathedral in procession on civic occasions, he stopped and bowed to the Lord Mayor who, in turn, bowed to him, the Bishop. It was an act of mutual acknowledgment, respect and even deference.

All that - the guard of honour, the bows, and the fact that the photograph appeared at all the next day in *The Cork Examiner*, speaks of a different age in Church-State relations in Ireland. That Service still continues now, every year - Lord Mayor, City Council, County Mayor, local TDs, Defence Forces, representatives of institutions and organisations, in the City and County of Cork, as well as NGOs, community groups, and charities all gather still to celebrate the Eucharist, and, led by those same maces - no guard of honour, no bowing (and no hair now in my case) - the Lord Mayor and I lead everyone across the road to our house for food and refreshments to set people up for a long St Patrick's Day. Even till the Lord Mayor makes an annual courtesy call to each of the bishops of Cork.

Every year, in my last nineteen as Bishop of Cork - next March will be my twentieth - I try to give everyone something to think about, on our national day; something to reflect on in the sphere of the place of religion and faith in our society, and the relationship between Church and State. It strikes me that that is what a Civic Service should do, and it is in that spirit I come to you today. As you continue your celebrations of the 850th year of your foundation, we might reflect for a moment on this Church-Civic or Church-State relationship - what it is for the ecclesiastical parties here, and for the civic or State representatives here. And immediately that categorisation is not adequate either, for we do not live in silos. Religious people are citizens of the State; and those in public civic life very often have religious convictions and outlook.

The relationship between our religious beliefs, or absence of them, and our country - the sort of country we want, the laws we make, the freedoms and rights we give expression to - are never far from our public discourse in the Ireland, Europe and indeed the world of today. Last week the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople recognised the independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from Moscow, and so the Russian Orthodox Church has split from Constantinople. This illustrates deep geopolitical tensions, alignments, realignments and confrontation, part of which, has its roots in the enduring outcomes of the First World War one hundred years ago.

Closer to home, later this week we will vote in a blasphemy referendum. We've already had referenda about marriage equality and abortion. There are ongoing fractious debates about admissions to and patronage within the education system; religion in the provision of health and social services in the State; the religious framework and references of *Bunreacht na hÉireann*; presidential oaths; the saying of prayers in the *Oireachtas*; and much else, including entitlement to freedom 'from' religion, as much as to the right of freedom of religion.

All this is the stuff of relationship between Church and State and it cannot just happen without thought or framework.

As so often happens today, much of the discourse is bluntly, or simplistically driven by megaphone non-dialogue on social media. There the cry goes up 'get the churches out of it all; it's none of their business'. But that is not what Separation of Church and State means.

My personal view is that separation of Church and State is a good thing: good for the State and good for the Church. But separation of Church and State, does not, of course, mean 'no religion' in the public space. It does not mean that services and encounters like this stop happening. It does not mean that religious bodies stop engaging in national debate or conversation, formal or informal, with civic authorities. It does not mean that religious entities should not be engaged politically; few religious leaders were as political as Jesus was and is. (Look at today's Gospel, and we will come back to that). On the contrary, even in the context of the strong secularizing trajectory of societies in Europe, the Lisbon Treaty, which includes a reference to God, respects, in Article 16, the status in law of churches and

religious associations, as well as philosophical and non-confessional organisations in member States, and, more than that, it provides for 'open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations.'

We sometimes appear to think that we in Ireland are exceptional, the only ones who have had a fraught and contested relationship with religious institutions and religion throughout our history. Ireland is not the only place where religion was used as an instrument of colonisation, power and control. Like so many other places in the Reformation era and afterwards, alignment of the people's religion with that of their ruler was seen foremost as a matter of the security of the State and, therefore, its safety and well-being. It is in that context that we understand the complications of much of our past.

Now, however, we live in times of diversity, plurality and freedom. Throughout Europe States have varieties of forms of relationship, formal and informal, with religions and religious institutions. As has been pointed out by the European Consortium for Church and State Research, in the EU 'there is always some form of cooperation or constructive cooperation.' Some have formal concordats or agreement, many, such as Ireland do not, but in each one there is dialogue.

My concern in Ireland is about how change is effected. We tend, too often, to drift reactively into it. Typically, aggrieved people identify an injustice which they feel strongly, and they protest and pursue change: a good example is the issue of admissions to schools and religious patronage of schools. Our institutions respond by finding a partial, often interim solution, but the underlying and fundamental approach, rationale or philosophy remains undefined.

Facilitated by the Department of the Taoiseach, there are, as required by the Lisbon Treaty, as I said, dialogues between the government of the day and religious entities about issues of mutual interest. What is needed, I believe, and paradoxically, in order to achieve separation of church and state, is a structured dialogue about the more fundamental question of the Church-State relationship itself: an all-embracing, intentional, formalised, multilateral dialogue about this very fundamental and contemporary question and the dilemmas it is constantly throwing up.

And this is where today's readings, conveniently, and serendipity of the schedule of readings prescribed for today - the lectionary - come in, and may have something to inspire us all. The two we heard reflect on the meaning of service and servanthood.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus is on a 'road trip' with the disciples from Caesarea Phillippi to just north of Jerusalem. This trip teaches them lessons. It turns out to be a crash course on what it means to follow Jesus. Before the row we witness, all of the disciples have been upset. Their worldview has been turned upside down. Two outsiders - two blind men have been given vision - they are outsiders

and it is they, not the in-group, who Jesus has helped. Again and again we see that in the life and teaching of Jesus, and it is profoundly uncomfortable for us. How do we who are on the inside - whether in Church and State - feel about that? We who exercise power, responsibility, authority, control - how do we exercise it? Like Jesus did so often - for the benefit of the outsiders, and turning things on their head?

And that is the background for the row about preferential treatment in today's Gospel. We still live in a world where many on the inside want preferential treatment. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and ... they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking...'

Their bid for privilege and opportunity causes the other disciples to be jealous, and so there is an argument:

'When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.'

Jesus had to set the record straight, and, in doing so, gives us all a model for following him, for leadership, for the exercise of power and responsibility, whether in Church or State, or in our dialogue with one another - it is called 'service' - and that, of course, is the origin of the word 'minister' whether in the church or in the state - servant, even, in some translations - 'inferior servant' How far removed have we come from that?

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