

Understanding democracy

of Church and State. Up to fifty years ago as the new, primarily Catholic, Ireland emerged from under the wing of the United Kingdom, dependence on religious leaders in public life might have been understandable, if not at times excusable. But this early dependency has allowed clericalism in society to linger to this day. Some citizens continue to look to the Catholic Church for leadership on certain political-moral issues. Some leaders are equally prepared to stand back so as to allow the hierarchy to take the heat on these issues.

A recent stance taken by Bishop Barron in the US is instructive for all Catholics. During the political iconoclastic statue-toppling phase of the summer of 2020 occasioned by the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, a statue of Saint Junipero was toppled in Los Angeles in a local park named after the saint. Catholics who took exception to this wanted local Church leaders to condemn the action. Bishop Barron refused to engage and pointed out that this was clearly a matter for lay Catholic citizens to deal with and not for the Church hierarchy to resolve. He added that the bishops would of course address the matter with their congregations.

Attempts by Irish bishops in recent years not to get involved in political decisions have been seen by some Catholic citizens as a dereliction of duty rather than what it fundamentally is – a healthy understanding of church-state separation.

The bishops' duties to educate church members in morality is best achieved over an extended period in time and not simply when a matter becomes political. But they do also have the right and responsibility to inform people in a timely manner about the consequences of all moral issues.

A somewhat clerical Ireland is still not fully accepting of lay responsibility, whereas on the other hand, the Irish media can show intolerance towards bishops seeking to contribute ideas to the public square. In short, Irish Catholics need to understand the value of being less clerical and more secular, while resisting the pressures of secularisation.

The free market

Liberalism supports free markets, free trade, and capitalism – so liberal democracies generally have a free market economy. Through the mechanism of the free market, the activities between producers and consumers of goods are coordinated. A free exchange of goods between people takes place, with a capacity for someone to make a profit on an exchange and keep that profit for reinvesting in one's business or for personal advancement.

Government interference in the market is normally limited to ensuring that any redistribution of goods advances justice, and therefore peace and prosperity in society. The success of the free market economy in generating wealth is partly due to political stability in liberal democracies, and in turn that success enhances stability. Democracy's failure to manage an adequate redistribution of wealth is often a cause of instability.

As for any system, especially one as finely balanced as democracy, many things can go wrong. The market economy itself is complex and it may fail to produce prosperity for all, thus upsetting the democratic equilibrium. The fragility of a democracy also lies in the lack of care taken of its foundations, in how its institutions manage citizens' freedoms, and in how power is periodically transferred.

Troubling economic signs

All is not well with democracy in 2021. A pessimistic world view would certainly signal real dangers ahead.

For the past two generations across most of the West, democracy has not been delivering on the progress it promises. There has been a stagnation in living standards. The best data on this which comes from the USA shows a relative decline in figures for earned income over a period of fifty years. Economic experts point also to a stagnation in scientific innovation over the past forty years, when one excludes the benefits of small-screen information technology.