

Church at a crossroads: Bishops, priests, and lay Catholics speak out

As the Church's three-year synod approaches its final year, Catholics in Ireland await the outcome with a variety of hopes and aspirations, writes Conor Capplis



Bishop of Cloyne William Crean with Monsignor Denis Reidy (left) and parish priest Fr Patrick Winkle (right), after celebrating mass to mark the 150th anniversary of St Mary's Church in Carrigtwohill, Co Cork. Picture: David Keane

SUN, 04 SEP, 2022 - 12:30

CONOR CAPPLIS

The story of Jesus meeting a sceptical Samaritan woman at the well told in the Gospel of John is, for many Christians, a story of encountering Jesus and choosing his well as the source of eternal life.

As the Irish Church faces a crossroads ahead, with many big decisions to be made, Bishop William Crean of the



THE increasingly secularised nation has found new watering holes after decades of Church scandals.

“Where are people finding their sources of, say, imagination, vision, inspiration, motivation, direction, purpose and meaning?” he asks, speaking to the *Irish Examiner* at his palace in Cobh, Co Cork.

“I find myself asking: for young people, what’s the source of their spirituality?”



Bishop of Cloyne William Crean, celebrating the Chrism Mass and renewal of vows at St Colman's Cathedral in Cobh. Picture: David Keane

“Maybe you could compare it to a particular kind of drink. You have some wells that are soft and fizzy, and it’s great to taste in the beginning, but if you want to sustain yourself: Get good clean water.”

While he's concerned for the Irish people, Bishop Crean says he respects the choices of those steering clear of the Church and its teachings. A “spiritual drought” he calls it.

“They’re all valid,” he says. “But one would be questioning how enduring and sustaining they are for people’s lives.



The growing reality in Ireland today, is many have left that well far behind or want nothing to do with it or the son of God.

Ireland in 2022 feels in some respects centuries from the Catholic Church that dominated its political and familial life throughout much of the 20th century.

Although the 2016 census figures show that 78.3% identify as Catholic in Ireland, most parishes see just a tiny percentage attend Sunday Mass — and an even smaller number actively involved in Church life.

Archbishop of Tuam Francis Duffy recently said the only certainty for the future of the Catholic Church in Ireland is the “ongoing and sustained decline” of worshippers and priests and said, “all trends [point] dramatically downwards” with “no turning point in sight”.





Archbishop of Tuam Francis Duffy. Picture: Ray Ryan

Census data also shows huge decreases in young people identifying as Catholic — most of whom aren't practicing anyway — highlighting an ageing demographic.

So after years of warnings about the death of Catholicism in Ireland, what does the Church look like in 2022?

And should the institution reinvent itself to survive in secular Ireland and risk wavering from its steadfastness in its teachings, or accept its fate as a smaller community and stay true to its doctrine?



crisis. Dwindling numbers of priests have forced parishes to amalgamate and share clergymen, with some churches holding mass just once a month.

“This process started a long time ago,” says Fr Tony Flannery.

One hundred seminarians entered training for the priesthood with Fr Flannery in 1964, and about 500 were training in total across Ireland. Just a small fraction of those finished their training.



Fr Tony Flannery at home near Newport, Co Tipperary. Picture: Don Moloney

“By the time I was ordained 10 years later, the number of students had gone down to less than 20,” he says.

“In [those] 10 years there was a massive exodus of students and the numbers coming in were declining year by year.”

Not long ago there were seminaries across the country, but with a “dramatic decline” since the early 2000s, most have shut down. St Patrick’s Seminary in Maynooth



“If you go back to 1979 when St John Paul II came [to Ireland], it seemed that things were really healthy and vibrant at that point,” says Bishop of Killaloe Fintan Monahan, who at 55 is one of Ireland’s youngest bishops.



The Bishop of Killaloe Fintan Monaghan at the burial place of Dr Denis Harty, Vicar Apostolic of Killaloe (1657-1667). Picture: Pádraig Ó Flannabhra/Photoart

“And then from the 1980s things began to decline in terms of mass attendance and all of that, after the euphoria that was there with St John Paul II and 1m turning up to Phoenix Park.”

“The average age of priests in Ireland is somewhere around 73 or 74,” says Fr Flannery, which is just shy of the expected age of retirement at 75. “There are only a handful of priests under the age of 50”.





Fr Flannery says there are hundreds of priests who are still practicing above 75, the usual age of retirement, and some are in their 80sPicture: Don Moloney

He believes there are hundreds of priests who are still practicing above 75, the usual age of retirement, and some are in their 80s.

This is “out of necessity because there is nobody to take their place... The inclination for a lot of them is to hang on for as long as they possibly can... That’s the reality of priesthood in Ireland. Clearly, priesthood as we have known it in Ireland is dying out and another 10 years will see most of the priests gone,” he says.

Bishop Monaghan’s diocese is at a “much advanced stage” of this decline in priests. Twenty years ago, the Church began spreading out numbers and several parishes have



The next phase of that would be probably closure of the smaller churches, but that's way down the line," he says.

"That would be no more than tampering with the parish structure. Some people have such an attachment to their church. But I suppose if it does become financially unviable, what can you do?"

He says there is "no systematic plan" for repurposing Church property in the coming years but suggests they could be used by the community in new ways or sold to councils.

So how did Ireland move from a country so interlinked with the Catholic Church, to the institution we find hanging by a thread today?

"Since the 1960s there was a whole bunch of cultural shifts that were beginning then and have rolled themselves out over the decades," says Bishop Crean.

A "cultural migration" has taken place in Ireland, he says, and many have ambitions that don't align with the priesthood anymore.

"[For] a young person coming through, the possibility of the priesthood being a positive choice is probably diminished somewhat for all kinds of reasons. You're not going to get rich" — looking around at the grand library room we're sitting in, I suggest that one might get a nice house, but the Bishop is quick to respond.

"It's a house on your own," he points out, adding that celibacy is a huge barrier for those considering this path.

For Bishop Monaghan, clerical abuse scandals have contributed to this decline, alongside general "secularisation" and the "growth of materialism".



community, people come forward for pastoral involvement, but this has shrunk, he says.

Fr Flannery says more than 90% of Catholics attended mass weekly in the 1950s, and pre-pandemic it was closer to 30% but it “varied widely from place to place”.

“But that was pre-pandemic,” he said.

“

Everything we’re hearing now is that the pandemic has had a dramatic effect in reducing further church attendance.”

None of this is new, however, you’d have to be hiding under a rock to miss the cultural sidelining of the Catholic Church in recent decades. What is new, however, is an effort from within Church hierarchy to respond to such widespread decline with an invitation to change.

The Church is at a crossroads, and its foot soldiers are well aware of it.

Role of lay people

Fr Patsy Lynch will be the last resident priest in his parish of Ballinskelligs, Co Kerry. Part of the Church’s plan to fill the gaps left by retiring priests, is encouraging greater involvement among lay people.

He believes it may dawn on parishioners when he retires that the Church will need them in order to survive.





Fr Patsy Lynch says it is disappointing to see the church 'slipping back into its old ways' after the pandemic, He used a drone to livestream services, which he says is here to stay. Picture: Don MacMonagle

“They have gotten used to it. For years and years, the priest did everything.

“We have to change, there’s no doubt about that... It is about empowering people more and more. As priests, our role is not to control. Our role is to lead.

“Unfortunately, I don’t see that leadership from priests that I would like to see. We have to be instruments of change ourselves. That’s where it begins: Empowering the people.”

“I spent over 30 years in Ghana as a missionary priest and there, the Church was alive! People were involved. Here, everything is left to the priests. And a lot of priests unfortunately just want to be in control.”

He is disappointed to see the Church “slipping back into its old ways” after the pandemic.

“I would love to hear people have new ideas... experimenting and inventing new ways of reaching out [to people] and share how they are using technology,” he said.



stay [and] I am very disappointed we are not embracing this way forward”.

“We have to be relevant, embracing technology and communications,” he added. “I’m very, very disappointed that Church isn’t doing more.”

Opportunity for change

Last year Pope Francis called a universal synod — basically one big group listening session in every parish in the world — to give voice to people at all levels of the institution on its future.

Some are hoping for progressive voices to be heard in Rome next year at the close of the three-year synod, and others looking to maintain the authority of the Church hierarchy and its historical teachings.

A summary of Ireland’s synodal discussions at parishes and at a conference in Athlone in June was sent to the Vatican last month and marked what looked like a turning point in its history.

It revealed that many want female priests, optional celibacy, and the full inclusion of the LGBTQI+ community.

Suppressing fears that some of the more “radical” elements would be omitted from the final report for Rome, the Church sent the national synthesis document that laid bare the task ahead of the institution if it wants to retain widespread appeal in Ireland.

Church reform campaigner Ursula Halligan says she feared “that the bishops might try to censor or dilute the view of Irish Catholics. The Catholic Church has been an



The marvellous thing is that it didn't, the former broadcaster and journalist says.

What's your view on this issue?

You can tell us here

The synodal process is part of Pope Francis's efforts to move the Church "away from a hierarchal model of church towards a people of God model", she believes.

The Pope has "lit the fuse" with the synod. "I predict it will be explosive."

"The vast majority of Irish people have just walked away, especially women. But they haven't walked away from their faith, just the institutions."

But the Church must "rebuild and regroup" from within and not "demonise the institutional Church... otherwise Christianity means absolutely nothing".

"We know that there will be forces at work within the Church resisting any change, because a lot of people in the institutional Church are comfortable with the status quo.

"And a lot of them have bought into a patriarchal mindset. I do have hope, but I am under no illusions that it will be tough.

"This is only the beginning," she says, "it's going to take time, but we're ready for the long haul."

The report found an absence of young people in Church life. Most parishes struggled to find young people to engage with the process at all.



crisis, and disagreed with the Church's teaching on sexuality. It said the absence of young people in Church life and how to increase engagement is "urgent".

But not all conform to this narrative, and some are critical of the synodal process.

Conservative Catholics

Following the pre-synodal conference at Athlone, a petition reportedly signed by more than 500 young people in Ireland said the "current synthesis of the synod of Ireland is at risk of concluding that the sense of the faithful (Sensus Fidei) is in conflict with the teaching of the Catholic Church".

"It suggests that the faithful in Ireland wish to change Church teaching on sexuality, marriage and the ordination of women", the petition said.

"We as faithful young Catholics fully accept Church teaching and have no desire to have it changed."

The letter, which was sent to the Church's Synodal Pathway steering committee said, "false conclusions" were being presented in Athlone, and that "emerging concerns" in parishes should not prompt change but "instead a call to communicate Church teachings better".

One signatory was 21-year-old Matthias Conroy who was auditor of University College Dublin's Newman Catholic Society last year.





Matthias Conroy, a student of philosophy and politics at UCD. Photograph Moya Nolan

“Being a Catholic is the best thing about my life,” he says.

He believes many older people in the Church feel some changes are needed to include more young people, but “this inevitably involves changing something that makes the Church, the Church” and changing fundamental teachings passed down by Jesus.

“I don’t think that’s the answer. The answer to include more young people is being authentic and true in saying, ‘This is what we believe, here is the good news.’”

“I think a lot of churches in the [US] have gone down the route of — for lack of a better term — ‘watering down’ their teachings on questions of morality for instance and acquiescing to the will of whatever the particular cultural movement is at the time.

“I think that those churches have had successes in the general public sphere, but their actual numbers of attendants and committed believers have actually gone down.”





From left to right: Caroline Mulroy from Galway, Annika Haeusl from Bavaria, and Helen Vysotska from Knocklyon during the launch of a submission by the Pro Life Commission to review the process of the abortion law at Leinster House on Kildare Street, Dublin. Picture: Gareth Chaney/Collins Photos

Another signatory, 24-year-old Helen Vysotska, says the synod is a “great gift of the Church” but the synod in Ireland “veered away from the experience of the Church and instead focused on reforming the Church’s teachings based on public opinion”.

“The Church has always been evolving to become more perfect within the doctrine and synods help to make this happen,” she says.

“That’s different to changing the doctrine as that has never been changed because that cannot be changed. Christ has already spoken.”

While many have rejoiced at the synod’s finding so far, Conroy and Vysotska aren’t alone in their criticism of the synodal process and the legitimacy of its findings.

Bishop Alphonsus Cullinan, who is a member of conservative Catholic organisation Opus Dei, believes





Fr Alphonus Cullinan is the Bishop of Waterford.

“From my own interaction with some ‘conservative’ or ‘traditional’ believers it was clear that many did not engage with the synodal process at a parish level,” he said in a statement on his website for the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore.

“If the Church in Ireland is worried about groups on the margins of Irish society, then we will have to dialogue in a more serious way with what might be termed ‘traditional Catholics,’” he wrote.



that the synod process itself was somewhat rushed and time limits handed down by the Vatican were “insufficient”.

Bishop Cullinan said there was “far too much introspection” at the pre-synodal gathering in Athlone.

“Where was the prophetic voice of the Church calling society to take a serious look at itself? Where was the challenge to the prevailing culture of individualism and secularism? Are we just giving in to current trends and forgetting about the wisdom of past generations and the long tradition of the Church?”

Not all within the Church are keen to embrace a change in structure and teachings, but many Church leaders in Ireland are hopeful this synod will usher in a new era . But many believe this cannot happen without confronting the barriers to Church involvement for many.

Shadow of clerical abuse

Clerical abuse is “alive for as long as there are victims”, says Bishop Crean. “Society will remember it as a particularly black period.” For Bishop Monaghan, the spectre of clerical abuse will “always be with our generation, perhaps forever”.

Dr Nicola Brady, chair of the steering committee of the synodal pathway, believes the synod is “an opportunity to address the history of abuse within the Church “with its focus on healing relationships, on better, more inclusive, more respectful dialogue”.



done so much for the transformation of the Church.

In the synodal process in Ireland, “some of the really prophetic voices have been the victims and survivors who have called us to healing, to justice, to reconciliation. So if we’re willing to really listen to what they have to say, I think they can really help the process of renewal in the Church.”

“A huge amount has been done to address it with safeguarding procedures,” Bishop Monaghan says. “But it is something that has done untold damage to the Church and the credibility of the Church. There’s no doubt about that. And it’s something that will remain with us for the lifetime of our generation.”

“I would say that the Church has learned,” Bishop Crean says.

“

We have learned because we were confronted with it so vigorously.”

The Diocese of Cloyne recently completed its second audit that “affirmed the safeguarding structures in place”.

“I think we are much more vigilant now than we were — but we never rule out the possibility [of it happening again],” he says. “Paedophilia is a reality.”

Women and celibacy

Another barrier holding back many from involvement in the Church is its attitude towards women. In 1976 the Church deemed itself unauthorised to admit women into priestly ordination.



 **Irish Examiner****NEWS SPORT LIFESTYLE OPINION**

Speaking in Rome on International Women's Day in 2018, she said while the Vatican Council has created more roles for lay women in recent years, "these have simply marginally increased the visibility of women in subordinate roles... but they have added nothing to their decision-making power or their voice".



Trinity's Chancellor Dr Mary McAleese said a Catholic Church where women are 'equals' and 'truly matter' is the only church 'worthy of Christ'. Picture: Maxwells



...name is 'equality ... the Catholic Church lags noticeably behind the world's advanced nations in the elimination of discrimination against women'.

The Church's "overt patriarchalism acts as a powerful brake on dismantling the architecture of misogyny wherever it is found". A Catholic Church where women are "equals" and "truly matter" is the only church "worthy of Christ", she said.

Meanwhile, many clergymen interviewed for this article felt that priests should be allowed to marry and rules on this may change in the future.

Close to this matter is celibacy, and there are equally growing sentiments that these rules should change.

"I certainly see it as a possibility happening in the future," says Bishop Crean. But he doesn't believe the issues of celibacy and marriage for priests can be addressed "without addressing the question of women's leadership in the Church."

"You can't say that women aren't capable of as powerful spiritual leadership as men. They have shown it across the centuries," he says. "It would be a different style of leadership, I mean, look at all the extraordinary women that lead religious communities."

In contrast, Helen Vysotska believes "women cannot be priests because a priest is 'in persona Christi' which means that the person is the person of Christ when they consecrate the gifts of wine and bread and turn them as Christ did at the Last Supper into His Body and His Blood.

"There is no dispute in that Jesus was a man and even a census will tell you that. Women in leadership does not equate women in priesthood. Women over the years in the



Queer and Catholic

If the Church seeks to find relevance with a new generation that remains vastly underrepresented among its ranks, should it address its attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community?

Describing acts of homosexuality as “intrinsically evil” doesn’t exactly get the gays on board, and an increasing number of Catholics feel the same — particularly young people, as the synod report has shown.

“The Catholic teaching as it currently is the catechism and in the code of canon law is very problematic,” says Fr Flannery.

“It uses some appalling language. It describes people of a homosexual orientation as ‘disordered’. That’s absolutely out of order.”

He says the Church’s treatment of the LGBTQ+ community “tends to turn young people off big time... There doesn’t seem to be any sign of a reversal in that trend and if we judge by what has happened by countries around Europe, the reality probably is that this decline will continue in the foreseeable future”.





Fr Flannery says that describing people of a homosexual orientation as disordered is 'absolutely out of order'. Picture: Don Moloney

He says this view of gay people as “disordered” comes from a “very traditional thinking” that people choose to be gay, whereas now it is accepted as an “innate part of you”.

“For the Church to say that something that is innate in a person — that is part of them as they were created — that that is disordered. It’s so totally wrong because actually they’re saying that the creator created this person in a disordered state. So it’s actually a major insult to God.”

Should the Church, then, reverse its statements on sexuality, combatting its decline in relevancy within an increasingly liberal society?



should be reserved for a man and a woman. However, he suggests “another word be used” for same-sex commitments.

Fr Flannery says that if the Catholic Church changed its teachings on the ordination of women and homosexuality, “it would mean changing Church doctrine, and that’s the big stumbling block.

“The Vatican as it is presently constituted [has] absolutely set their face against changing Church doctrine — and that incidentally is why I’ve been suspended from priesthood for the last 10 years.”

Fr Flannery, who co-founded the Association of Catholic Priests in 2010, which has been a voice for reform within the Church, has not been allowed to minister publicly as a priest since 2012. The decision came after the Church took issue with views he aired publicly around women in the Church and its teachings on sexuality.

The future

Many Catholics were active campaigners in the 2018 referendum on the right to termination of pregnancies. And although not all hold pro-life views, many remain strong proponents of protecting the unborn.

So will the Church’s relevance decline further as a majority in Ireland are in favour of abortion?

“I think it will to a degree, but it will also find support from others,” says Bishop Crean. “I have a very strong sense it's non-negotiable within the Catholic framework, it certainly is currently.”



unwavering on its pro-life stance, and I would have got proactively involved in that referendum and would have been more passionate about it than any of the previous ones. And certainly, it is associated, for good or for bad, with the religious cause.”

It’s a turbulent time to be a Catholic in Ireland, and in many ways the institution is increasingly at odds with the public opinion. So what will the future look like?

Bishop Monaghan says the Church is going to be a “much leaner, watered down Church in terms of numbers”.

He surmises it may head towards the “St Benedict model of small base Christian communities... and very much back to basic gospel values. Historically in Ireland the Church and state worked ‘hand and glove’ and maybe that wasn’t a healthy thing for either institution”.

“I think we will see a smaller but dedicated church,” says Matthias Conroy.

“Unfortunately, we’re going to have to convert a lot of churches, we just won’t have anybody to fill them which is a tragedy.”

“I believe that the smaller the Church does not mean the worse it is,” says Helen Vysotska.

“In fact, I think the opposite. The more truthful and faithful it is to its core foundations, beliefs and teachings that have been instituted and demonstrated by Christ himself. There are a lot more young, practising Catholics than people think.”

“Things have to change,” says Fr Lynch.



“It’s not going to suddenly become apparent maybe next year when the three years [of the synod] are completed.

“

We have to see seeds of change now.

Bishop Crean, however, is more hopeful; he believes the Church eventually will “blossom” again, and “probably blossom a little differently in different countries depending on the cultural scene”.

The path ahead remains rocky for the Church. From Church leaders right down to parishioners and young activists, there is no firm consensus on many pressure points highlighted in the synod report. The crossroads at which the Church finds itself will ultimately decide the future of its place in society.

Undoubtedly the numerical high point of Catholicism in Ireland has passed, but something different is on the horizon.

“The natural diminishment of clerical leadership will enable a new kind of leadership to emerge,” Bishop Crean says. “There must be a shedding of stuff that has served its time, and some of it wasn’t great, but there were some very good things”.

“A death is necessary for a new seed to take root.”

What is the synod?

In October last year, Pope Francis called a universal synod, catapulting Catholics into a three-year listening



Speaking at Knock Shrine last month, Dr Nicola Brady, chair of the synodal pathway steering committee, said synodality comes from the Greek for “together on the way”.

“Synodality is about how we journey together as a Christian community — listening to and supporting one another and discerning together how we are called to live as followers of Christ in the circumstances of today.” What’s particularly unique about this synod, is its inclusion not just of bishops in discerning what God wants of the Church, but for the first time since the early Church parishioners have a say on the themes of communion, participation and mission.

The first phase of the process Ireland was an all-island invitation to hold listening sessions at a parish level. 42,000 Catholics, or 0.93% of those who identify as such, participated last Spring in what ultimately became much more than a reflection on the themes handed down from the Vatican.

As summary reports were published by each diocese revealed emerging themes around topics such as abuse, sexuality, the role of women in the Church and young people.

A pre-synodal conference was held in Athlone in June where bishops, Catholic interest groups and members of the synod steering committee gathered to reflect on the themes and concerns. Feedback in Athlone was compiled with a summary of Ireland’s synod and sent to Rome on August 15th.

The next phase will see further conversation at a continental level before the process comes to a close late next year at the Vatican, where the Pope will be



Dr Brady said there exists a "significant challenge" in "building and re-building trust in the Church", and "synodality offers the tools to connect and re-connect with people". However, she added that the Church is "very conscious" its work has its limitations as the synod "did not reach as many people as we would have wanted", particularly young people.

Separate to the global synod called by Pope Francis, Irish bishops of the Catholic Church in Ireland have committed to a national synod to continue beyond October next year when the global synod concludes.

Synod highlights desire for female priests, optional celibacy, and inclusion for all

A national synthesis of the synod in Ireland was published in August, highlighting clear calls for change within the Church.

During consultations, there were calls for women to be given equal treatment within Church structures in terms of leadership and decision making.

"Many women remarked that they are not prepared to be considered second class citizens anymore, and many are leaving the Church," it said.

There were calls from both young and old participants for optional celibacy, married priests, female priests, and the return of those who had left the priesthood to marry.

There was a clear, overwhelming call for the full inclusion of LGBTQI+ people in the Church, including calls from an



people is tolerated, and even encouraged .

“The physical, sexual and emotional abuse and its concealment by the Church in Ireland was described as an ‘open wound’”, the report said, and added there is a “palpable sense that despite many efforts by the Church, a ‘reckoning’ had not yet taken place”.

Dr Nicola Brady said the findings of the synod in Ireland are “stark” and “many of the experiences shared are painful”.

“Some of these painful issues around identity and belonging have the potential to be divisive,” she said. “But our experience to date demonstrates that they need not necessarily be so. It is possible to hold on to our convictions and at the same time to choose relationship over rupture, taking the time to ask questions, to deepen our understanding, to seek points of connection even in the midst of disagreement.

“As we reflect on the history of this island, we can see the devastating and often deadly consequences of polarising tendencies that turn every disagreement into a power struggle. Through the synodal process the Church has a God-given opportunity to model a better way, contributing not only to the healing of relationships within the Church, but to the work of building a more just and compassionate society for all.”

[Read More](#)

 [Irish Examiner view: Pope Francis is still fired with enthusiasm for his mission](#)

MORE IN THIS SECTION





Night of shared culture and tradition deepens bond between Ukrainians and Irish

Ukrainians sing to remember their homeland, and locals to remember an Ireland slowly fading into the history books



Kate Bezus from Ukraine plays 'A Mhuire Mháthair' on the tin whistle at the rambling house session hosted by Knockfierna Heritage Society. Pictures: Brian Arthur

MON, 09 JAN, 2023 - 02:00

CONOR CAPPLIS

Jimmy Reidy sits on a wooden chair by a quietly-crackling fire, telling a story of Paddy Englishman, Scotsman, and Irishman all throwing themselves off a building over some minor qualms about their packed lunches.

The punchline is met by a roar of laughter from friends and strangers alike, before he starts into a tune on the harmonica. As he plays, a couple of guitarists find the



chords and watch for the changes. Not forced, but naturally finding their stride.

It sounds like a scene from a traditional Irish gathering, not least as it is being held in a small famine-era cottage in rural Limerick where local storytellers, musicians, and teamakers have gathered.

However, they are there on the eve of **Eastern Orthodox Christmas** in a gathering which has an even mix of 40 locals and Ukrainians.



Ukrainians attend the Knockfierna Heritage Society rambling house session on Little Christmas night.

The most wonderful trinkets dangle from walls and cabinets. Old Christmas cards and a rogue Christmas stocking hang from a line across an archway between the old cottage and a new extension, where rows of church pews and paint-spattered benches are arranged.

A framed picture reading “God Save Ireland” hangs prominently, a Child of Prague statue sits above the fireplace, and the same image of Jesus is dotted around sporadically.

A young Ukrainian woman borrows a guitar to sing in her native tongue, flanked by her peers giving backing vocals.



Much like the Irish, Ukrainians sing along or hum the tunes of their own songs, and locals tap their feet to the beat.

Limerick man Pat O'Donovan bought the house 50 years ago after it was left unoccupied for a decade. He renovated the small building and it soon became the focal point for locals to exchange traditional Irish culture, and most importantly, record it.

Pat is the chairman of Knockfierna Heritage Society, which he helped found in 1987. The society aims to preserve the traditions of an Ireland slowly fading into memory. Before the pandemic, and the building of its new extension last year, up to 50 people would pile into the small cottage, shoulder to shoulder, sitting along the narrow stairs and peering through windows.

"It was packed in, in those days," he says fondly, with a hint of sadness. Some absences are felt tonight, as not every storyteller made it through the pandemic. "The new extension part, of course, really makes a difference, because that crowd wouldn't have fitted at all in the olden days," he says.

Last March, some new faces were welcomed to Cahermoyle nearby, as Ukrainians fleeing the **Russian invasion** of their homeland moved into an empty religious house. After getting to know some of the 150 Ukrainians, Pat wanted to share "the real old Ireland" with them and exchange cultures on the eve of their traditional Christmas.





Ukrainian Kateryna Lapina speaks to those attending the rambling house in Co Limerick.

Fifth-class Ukrainian student Kateryna Lapina, with near-perfect English, introduces herself to the crowd. After learning the tin whistle since coming to Ireland, she plays 'Away in a Manger'. There is a deep respect among those present, who listen intently to the young musician. You could hear a tiny whisper in the back of the room, such was the attention given to her.

Seven Ukrainian women, young and old, gather by the fire to sing Christmas songs of great national significance and are met with delight by locals with shouts of "bualadh bos!".

"We hadn't a clue what ye were saying but that was beautiful," Pat proclaims to the group.

"They have some fine singers," Pat says. "It's the first time we've had such a wonderful mix."

Lively traditional Irish songs are a clear favourite of the Eastern European guests. Ukrainians move in their seats to the beat of the bodhrán and spoons, narrated by a fiddle and accordion. One boy dances in his seat, stops to reach over and grab a handful from a box of Quality Street, and soon returns to his groove.





Ukrainian Hanna Martynenko sings at Knockfierna Heritage Society's rambling house session. Pictures: Brian Arthur

Some close their eyes, smiling, while some of the younger children are glued to their phones, playing variations of Candy Crush and the like.

Among the Ukrainian singers is Nataliia Bezus, who left her home in Lviv, Western Ukraine, shortly after the invasion began.

“It’s really good to try to know the other culture and to show our own culture,” she says.

“

The religion and traditions are different, but it’s nice to be friends.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine recently gave its blessing for its followers to **celebrate Christmas along with the rest of the world on December 25**, signalling a shift from the traditional Russian Orthodox Christmas celebrations on January 7.

“The time is coming when all [Ukrainian] people will celebrate on the one day, December 25, to celebrate with



the whole world,” she says.

A local man sings of old Ireland, Killarney, and Cork’s Shandon bells in an almost solemn affair, mourning the country of his youth.



Willie Williamson plays the saxophone in the session.

As the music goes on, two women prepare a large pot of tea and scones and soda bread in the other room. When the crowd begins to mingle, a man plays a flute quietly in the corner, sound-tracking the evening. New friends swap stories from times gone by.

“The community want to go back home for their own home and land,” Nataliia says solemnly, adding that many are waiting in hope it will be safe to return home soon.

“

They try to do their best and be useful here in Ireland, try to get a job, just to not sit and wait for something. We really try.

To end the evening, everyone stands for an unaccompanied Ukrainian national anthem, which is



witnessed by many with a hand on their hearts and a tear in the eye.

Despite the cultural differences and language barrier, much is found in common. Ukrainians sing to remember their homeland, and locals to remember a land slowly fading to the history books — one lost person at a time.

[Read More](#)

➔ Watch: 'The choir helps us feel at home for a moment' say Ukrainians in Cork

MORE IN THIS SECTION



Risk of flooding as Met Éireann issues rain warning for all of Munster and four other counties



Father of boy killed while out cycling in Carrigaline issues road safety plea



Cork to get extra morning service from Dublin in new Irish Rail timetable proposal

PLACE: LIMERICK PLACE: UKRAINE

ORGANISATION: KNOCKFIERNA HERITAGE SOCIETY

Lunchtime News



Fashion

Mullets are back. I've got one, and I don't care if you don't like it. I think I look class

The idea of the hairstyle being fashionable again is worse than the prospect of the return of dial-up internet for some people

Expand



Conor Capplis: one colleague compared me to a Stasi agent in East Berlin. Photograph: Dara Mac Dónaill

Conor Capplis

Fri Feb 3 2023 - 06:00



I love my mullet. As five-year-old Billy Brady [said](#) on The Late Late Toy Show, it's “business at the front, party at the back”. I recently had my hair cut into the style, and just like Marmite or cheese-and-onion chocolate, it's proving contentious.

“You've got a touch of Rudi Völler,” one colleague said to me, referring to the German World Cup winner. Herr Völler sported an impressive curly mullet in his heyday. “Or a footballer from Shoot! magazine circa 1984,” another colleague said. The best was a comparison to a Stasi agent in East Berlin, which I reported immediately to my commanding officer.

I almost got an ear pierced at the weekend, too, but thankfully chickened out. They would have had a field day with that.



A touch of Rudi Völler: the mulleted German footballer in 1994. Photograph: Moenkebild/Ullstein Bild via Getty

Perhaps mullets are controversial because of Ziggy Stardust/David Bowie, who etched the hairstyle into the public consciousness with a bad-boy narrative. Bono recently wrote in his [memoir](#) that he now finds his career-topping performance at Live Aid in 1985 excruciating to watch: “The mullet. All thoughts of altruism and of righteous anger, all the right reasons that we were there, all these flee my mind, and all I see is the ultimate bad hair day.”

READ MORE

Great restaurants to try along the north side of Dublin bay



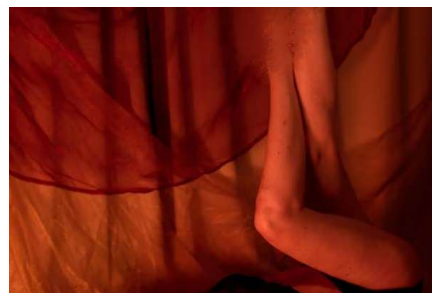
‘I’ve learned that alcohol just magnified the difficult emotions I already had’



‘When I see another eejit using a Centra bag as carry-on, I wonder how so many of us managed to emigrate’



When a fetish site posted photographs of Gráinne Blumenthal, she refused to be embarrassed



For some the idea of mullets being back is worse than the prospect of the return of dial-up internet. The news was recently broken to my uncle, who proceeded to wince and rant for 10 minutes about why mullets should be banished to the shadow realm otherwise known as the 1980s. Today however, we young’uns have grown to love our locks, and what was once relegated to Wham! tribute gigs is back at college parties and on red carpets and GAA pitches. If Paul Mescal gets up on stage to accept an Oscar in March, it’ll be game over for undercut and fade.

In some spots, however, the mullet was never suppressed. Parts of the United States (and maybe Cavan) never left the style behind, for example. Just think of [Tiger King's Joe Exotic](#).



Tiger King: parts of the United States never left the mullet behind. Just think of Joe Exotic. Photograph: Netflix

In fact, the mullet-and-moustache combo is also in heat again, and boy do people love to tell you what they think about your moustache. I sported my first one in 2018, while at college, and by God the artsy folk of Belfield were not ready. After a while I'd enough of the 1970s-porn-star comparisons and ditched the moustache in favour of a much more appealing beard – except my grandad said I looked like [Jihadi John](#), which quickly prompted a conversation about things people can say at the dinner table.

[\[How hard is the Garda fitness test? Conor Capplis and Sarah Burns take up the challenge \]](#)

In the intervening years Ireland's hairscape has changed. Faux 1980s fashion is in full swing (by myself included), and Stranger Things-sponsored mullets surely helped move along cyclical trends. I decided to give the moustache another go and try out a mullet for something different.

Nights out in Cork took a lively turn when I tried out the mullet-and-tache combo. No fewer than 15 people pulled me aside to compliment my moustache – primarily lads at the urinals, but I'll take compliments where I can. Whether it's a cashier at the shop or a Deliveroo fella at the door, men do love complimenting another man's moustache.

As for the mullet it transcends gender barriers. [House of the Dragon's](#) nonbinary lead, Emma D'Arcy, is a fine example. Anyone can try it out.

There can be the odd misguided effort, like the fella I saw who probably shaved the sides of his head at home with a dog trimmer. But of all the haircuts I've had, none have slapped so hard in the eyes of my peers as the mullet has. And you know what? I don't care if you don't like it. I think I look class.



[Conor Capplis](#)

Conor Capplis is a journalist with the Irish Times Group



Paul Mescal

Joe Exotic

Tiger King

IN THIS SECTION



The luxury Irish design destination that celebrates Irish textiles