

# Editorial

## Pulling the Tree-trunk into the Grate – A Cautionary Tale

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Editor



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A friend of mind told me recently that some years ago, on passing a small house, he was intrigued to see what appeared to be a fallen tree lying half-in, half-out the front door. The weather at the time was bitter, so he guessed that there was someone inside, sawing away, comfortably out of the cold. The next day, he saw the same thing: a tree-trunk was still straddling the doorway of the cottage. On day three, nothing had changed, and his curiosity got the better of him. Since he was slightly acquainted with the inhabitants, he called in to say hello and – hopefully – to find out what was going on with the tree.

Inside, the man of the house was sitting by his fireside, in which he was burning one end of the tree. Whenever the part in the fire was used up, he would simply pull the trunk further into the grate. Eventually, he'd be able to close the front door; but meanwhile, any loss of heat was, he judged, more than compensated by the saving of personal energy. Why burn calories by sawing when you can go right ahead and burn timber?

My friend and I had a good laugh when he shared this story, but within an hour, I knew that I'd heard a cautionary tale, a parable that shines some cold light on my own pastoral situation and, I'd suggest, the pastoral situation of the Irish Church. Clearly there is a lot of goodwill and a lot of good work going on, but I don't think it's altogether cynical to suggest that to some degree, we're pulling the trunk into the grate while the heat goes out the door.

We priests are busier than ever, and many of us look to the future with a degree of trepidation. We don't want to be faithless; we want to trust that the Lord is in the mix. But let's be frank: the trends are not encouraging and the numbers don't crunch too well. Meanwhile, we continue with the grand and venerable pastoral project of keeping the show on the road. In the terms of our parable, that would be pulling the trunk into the grate.

The trouble is that the show has not remained on the road: it veered off into some cultural ditch quite some distance back, and a good deal of our pastoral effort is heat going out the door. Our man in his cottage would have been better off to plan some sensible labour, to saw up that trunk, rendering it into manageable pieces. That purposeful expenditure of energy would have saved a lot more.

There is no pastoral panacea, but there is a pastoral principle, which is that the life of the Church is premised on the evangelisation of the baptised. We need to get serious about diverting some of the 'running-the-show' energy into the project of evangelisation. May God help us to do this before too much heat goes out the door.

Chris Hayden