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Irish journalist whose documentary uncovered sex abuse dies

Thomas P. Doyle | Jan. 12, 2012

APPRECIATION

Mary Raftery, an Irish journalist whose documentary series *States of Fear* exposed abuse in Irish Catholic schools, died in Dublin on Monday [1]. She was 54.

Mary was a journalist by profession, but by vocation, she was a deeply honest and compassionate woman who fearlessly challenged the Irish Catholic Church, and in doing so, made the present and the future a safer place for children.

Mary may not be as well-known in the United States as she is in her native Ireland, yet her life has made a profound difference for victims of clergy abuse everywhere. She did more than any one person to force the systemic vicious abuse in the Irish industrial schools into the open. She continued with her passion to help victims with her documentary *Cardinal Secrets*, an expose of the cover-up of sexual abuse in the archdiocese of Dublin.

In 1999, Mary produced *States of Fear* [2]. The ground-breaking documentary series revealed the almost-unbelievable and certainly horrifying degree of physical and sexual abuse in Irish industrial schools run by religious orders. The revelations chilled Ireland to the bone and resulted in what came to be known as the Ryan Commission [3] to investigate the abuse.

When *States of Fear* aired in 1999, it sent shock waves through Ireland. But most importantly, it vindicated the thousands of victims whose youth had been destroyed in the living nightmares scattered throughout the country.

Mary's other major project involving the church was a documentary about sexual abuse perpetrated by priests in the Dublin archdiocese.

Cardinal Secrets aired on a Thursday night in October 2002. On Friday morning, the front pages of the major Dublin newspapers zeroed in on the culture of dishonesty and cover-up orchestrated by the hierarchy.

The hard-hitting documentary portrayed the sexual violation in graphic and forceful terms. The most infuriating moment in the film comes when a reporter asks Cardinal Desmond Connell, then archbishop of Dublin, how often he met with victims. He replied, "I'm a very busy man."

I first met Mary in 2002, when she was working on *Cardinal Secrets*. She wanted to interview me for the film, so I flew from Germany, where I was living at the time, to Dublin.

I met Mary and her co-producer, Mick Peelo, and we went to dinner at a small Thai restaurant. I liked her from the start. She was unassuming, gentle and obviously brilliant. But what struck me more than anything was her compassion and quiet outrage at the spectacle of sexual and physical violation of the innocent by the church. Our only point of contention was when Mary wanted me to wear a Roman collar for the interview. By then, I

didn't even own one, and was loath to put on the garb again for many reasons, not the least of which was my fear that abuse survivors would see me in it and think I had betrayed them.

Mary and Mick were adamant: "If you wear that thing, even the pious Irish old ladies will believe every word that comes out of your mouth."

She won. I located a clergy collar and carried it in a shopping bag to the RTE studio the next day. I put it on in the men's room and sat for the interview.

Cardinal Secrets was a success, certainly not because I was in it, but because Mary and Mick were thorough, fearless and direct. The result: the investigation by the Murphy Commission [4], whose report was issued in November 2009.

Mary and I were instant friends. We stayed in contact and would get together whenever I was in Dublin. She never changed -- she was always gentle and sensitive, but her courage and willingness to take personal risks to expose injustice never wavered.

Mary Raftery's life was short when considered in terms of years. Yet she did more in those years for Ireland, for children, for abuse survivors and for humanity than most could ever dream of accomplishing. The Irish culture was in desperate need of liberation from the chains of clericalism. Mary Raftery, more than anyone else, wielded the ax that shattered those stifling and destructive bonds.

[Tom Doyle is a priest, canon lawyer, addictions therapist and longtime supporter of justice and compassion for clergy sex abuse victims. He is a co-author of the first report ever issued to the U.S. bishops on clergy sex abuse, in 1986.]

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