Opinion



Those who processed from the Stand4Truth rally to the Magdalene Laundry on Aug. 26 in Dublin held a variety of signs demanding justice from the Catholic Church and the Irish State. (NCR photo/Jamie Manson)



by Jamie Manson

View Author Profile

jmanson@ncronline.org
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It started with a procession. I was walking through the Royal Dublin Society venue on the first day of the World Meeting of Families, looking everywhere for the media center so I could pick up my press credentials.

A woman who was a bit too dour to be working the welcome desk at this persistently cheerful event directed me to another building outside the exhibition hall. Staring down at Google maps on my phone to help get my bearings, I suddenly realized I was walking straight into a parked van.

Just before impact, I looked up and found myself eye to eye with Mother Angelica. I reeled back. EWTN had painted her image on the back of their satellite truck. What little I could remember of the dour lady's directions was shocked from my memory.

I spotted one of the young, green-vested volunteers ahead, and ran toward him in the hope he could set me back on course. Then came my next near collision, this time with longest liturgical procession I've ever witnessed.

It began with dozens of altar servers. To my surprise, a number them were young women. But the brief female presence quickly gave way to a parade of patriarchs, walking two-by-two, purple zucchettos atop their heads.

Video of liturgical procession Aug. 22 for evening Mass during the World Meeting of Families. (YouTube/Jamie Manson)

Like ants at a picnic, it was hard to see where the line began, and hard to believe that there could be so many of them. They donned matching cream-colored vestments detailed with a rainbow, a symbol that felt a bit ironic, given the barring of any LGBT groups from participating in the event.

A band of mitered men made up last contingent, and as their pointy headdresses bobbed away, I recalled a story in Ireland's Journal I had read the day before, which

reported that 200 volunteers had spent days ironing those rainbow vestments.

"A number of wonderful volunteers, mostly mammies, used their expertise to make sure that the vestments were ironed and readied for various liturgies, including the closing Mass," Katie Crosby, one of the World Meeting of Family's organizers, told the Journal.

In Ireland, mammy is a term of endearment used by children for their mothers.

"'Ironing mammies?' " said one woman in the comment section. "Have we moved on at all?"

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Taxicab confessionals

Signs that Ireland has indeed moved on from the church of their childhood years could be seen clearly in Dublin's streets, and heard in the voices of the taxi drivers who navigate them.

Public transport in Dublin can be remarkably convoluted, so I found myself in the presence of a number of cabbies through my three-day stint. I quickly learned that announcing my destination would inadvertently invite commentary on the Catholic Church from my driver.

My first driver was an Irishman in his 70s, who repeatedly told me that driving a taxi was just a retirement job. I never found out what he did earlier in his life, but his commentary was as biting as it was articulate.

Like so many Irish people I would meet in cars, pubs and shops, he had little tolerance for the papal visit, insisting that Pope Francis was as conservative as his predecessors and that the visit was little more than an attempt to create good PR for the church.

"I hope that the young people, in particular, who go to this thing, realize that what they're seeing isn't just optics. It's an optical illusion," he said.

Another driver predicted that the papal Mass would look like the Trump inauguration — lots of empty space on the lawn where spectators were expected to be.

"Thousands of people are ordering tickets and then destroying them," he said. "And I don't blame them after the crimes this church has committed."

His prediction would prove true. Only 130,000 of the expected half-million ticket-holders turned up at the papal Mass on Sunday afternoon. It was a stunning contrast to the 1.25 million who showed up in Phoenix Park for Pope John Paul II in 1979.

A third driver lamented the state of homelessness in the city of Dublin, and wondered why a pope who says he loves the poor would allow the state to spend over $32 million dollars to host him.

"The homeless are afraid to stay in the emergency accommodations," he said. "There's so much land where I live just outside of Dublin. Why not take that money and build them real homes?"

The anger of my drivers was reflected in other places I saw in my walks through Dublin. A shop that typically sold costumes and games filled its windows with diabolical masks of nuns and bishops.



These garish masks of nuns and bishops were featured prominently in a Dublin costume shop. (NCR photo/Jamie Manson)

In the renowned Temple bar neighborhood, an artist named Gerard Mannix Flynn installed a mural on a corner declaring "A message to Pope Francis."

The installation, which was crowned by a string of upside-down Vatican City flags, had nine panels. Several featured enlarged "victim impact" police reports that graphically detailed the injuries sustained by children who had been sexually brutalized by priests.

Another panel, called "a signal of distress," offered a lament:

> We are left without hope.
>
> And we ask Pope Francis
>
> Why is he saving the guilty?
>
> Why does he continue to cover up?
>
> Why does he continue to forsake us?



An installation in the Temple Bar neighborhood by Gerard Mannix Flynn featured enlargements of police "victim impact reports" of the violence done to children by priests. (NCR photo/Jamie Manson)

Avenging the sins of the past

The anger and hurt of the Irish people was obvious, but it was harder to pinpoint precisely when the disillusionment began and when it turned so antagonistic.

Back inside the World Meeting of Families, I visited the Dominican Sisters' exhibition booth and chatted with an older Irish sister about when she first saw things begin to unravel. She believes that Catholics became radicalized against the church in the past three years or so. She credited former president of Ireland Mary McAleese's outspokenness during the 2015 marriage equality referendum as inspiring this new, bold and critical Irish Catholic voice.

"But also," she reflected, "as religious congregations we never really embraced Vatican II. We didn't educate ourselves and, as a result, we didn't educate the laity about the faith."

Later that day I posed the same question to a respected Irish religion journalist. He charted the course of the decline back to 2005, when the first of six reports about the church's mishandling of the abuse of children was published.

In 2009, another report from the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse detailed, in five devastating volumes, the fear, neglect and endemic sexual abuse suffering by children in Catholic schools and orphanages.

Later that year came the harrowing Murphy report that uncovered widespread abuse that was "obsessively" covered up by church authorities.

In 2011, the Cloyne report was published, which revealed the Vatican's role in covering up abuse. That report inspired the now famous speech by Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny, who charged that the report "excavates the dysfunction, disconnection, elitism and narcissism that dominate the culture of the Vatican to this day." The speech likely had as much persuasive impact on the consciences of the Irish people as McAleese's campaigning in the past few years.

Another blow came in the 2013 report on the Magdalene Laundries, institutions managed by the church that, from 1922 through 1996, held more than 10,000 "fallen" women and girls captive in forced labor. The final blow came in the confirmation, in 2017, of the mass grave of infants buried in a septic tank below a Mother and Baby home at Tuam in County Galway.

How could the Irish possibly sustain their faith amid so much darkness? How could they not be anything but enraged? Why on earth would they want to celebrate the visit of a pope and a legion of bishops?

The Irish have been forced to take an unflinching look at the abominable side of the church and the damage it has wrought on so many lives. Their rejection of Francis' visit to their country was really a reckoning, an act of avenging so many sins of the past.



Thousands gathered at the Garden of Remembrance in Parnell Square at the Stand4Truth rally Aug. 26, organized by clergy sex abuse survivor and activist Colm O'Gorman. (NCR photo/Jamie Manson)

Silent march

While the papal Mass was being celebrated in Dublin's Phoenix Park Aug. 26, a few miles away in Parnell Square another sort of ritual was taking place. Led by sex abuse survivor and activist Colm O'Gorman, the event, called Stand4Truth, used song, poetry, and rallying cries to lead the thousands of wounded Irish people who gathered there in a communal lamentation.

The event took place at the Garden of Remembrance, a place of quiet reflection dedicated to the memory of all who gave their lives in the cause of Irish freedom.

For this crowd, the struggle was to be free from a faith that had been used as an instrument of control within their families and towns, to be released from a church that was never truly separated from the state.

Sex abuse survivor Marie Collins, who is a veritable celebrity in Ireland, could be seen behind the stage greeting the event's organizers and participants. Folk artist Hozier performed his massive hit "Take Me to Church," a song that speaks of liberating oneself from a church that has chained its faithful in shame and submission.

There wasn't much talk of renewing or reforming the church in Ireland, but rather of the need for the people to just move on and take ownership of their own lives.

The event concluded with O'Gorman leading the crowd in a silent march just a few blocks away to the Ireland's last Magdalene Laundry, which closed in 1996. The grey sky above, heavy with clouds, was a perfect reflection of the heaviness of the hearts that marched below it.

As we walked down the road, there was no question which building was a former laundry. The looming brick building, now abandoned, seemed to emanate the presence of countless restless souls still longing for peace. We came to honor them, to stand with them in hushed repose, to give them the dignity they were denied in life.



After the Stand4Truth rally, participants were led to the doors of Dublin's last Magdalene Laundry, which closed in 1996. (NCR photo/Jamie Manson)

When the crowd reached the doors of the abandoned building, they quietly raised placards that read "Truth, Justice, Love." It was a gesture strikingly similar to the way the bread is elevated during the Mass.

And so my time in Dublin, which started with a procession, ended with one, too.

But this procession led to a different kind of Eucharist, or perhaps one that is actually truer to the sacrament. A broken people marched together as one body, crucified by a church that had shattered their hearts, but determined, through healing and transformed consciousness, to rise again.

[Jamie Manson is NCR books editor.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Jamie Manson's column, "Grace on the Margins," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.

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