News

Fr. Gerard Quirke raises the chalice at Mass Rock overlooking Keem Bay on Ireland's Achill Isl

Fr. Gerard Quirke raises the chalice at Mass Rock overlooking Keem Bay on Ireland's Achill Island April 4, 2021. The church in Ireland is launching a Year for Vocations as it grapples with a steep decline in seminary numbers and with aging priests. (OSV News/Courtesy Irish Catholic/Seán Molloy)



Sarah Mac Donald

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 17, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The church in Ireland is launching a Year for Vocations as it grapples with a steep decline in seminary numbers and with aging priests.

Focused on diocesan priesthood, the Year for Vocations opens April 30, on the 60th anniversary of St. Paul VI's launching of the World Day of Prayer for Vocations in 1963. It will last until April 2024.

"Take the Risk for Christ" is the theme of the initiative, which was unveiled at the national seminary in St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, March 7 by the Irish Bishops' Council for Vocations.

It takes place as the Irish church's 26 dioceses implement radical structural changes, including parish partnerships and enhanced roles for the laity, to offset the lack of priests.

"I suggest you look at your priest. He may be the last in a long line of resident pastors and may not be replaced," Archbishop Francis Duffy told the congregation in St. Mary's Church, Westport, in the Archdiocese of Tuam last July.

His stark warning was borne out by a survey published by the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP) last November that showed that a quarter of all priests currently serving in the Irish church are set to retire over the next 15 years.

The survey revealed that 547 of the 2,100 priests working in the Irish Church are aged between the ages of 61 and 75 and nearly 300 or 15% of working priests are 75 years old or older. The survey also showed that just 52 priests — or less than 2.5% of working priests — are younger than 40, and there are just 47 seminarians in St. Patrick's College. In 1984, there were 171 ordinations in Ireland.

One of the factors that has contributed to the decline in vocations is the clerical sexual abuse scandals. It was publicly underscored recently when a rising political star of the Fianna Fáil party announced he was resigning his council seat to train as a priest. Thirty-year-old Councillor Mark Nestor said he first thought about priesthood in his late teens but was "put off by the various scandals involving the church in Ireland."

Advertisement

"There are vocations in Ireland. God is constantly calling; it's just that in the midst of the loudness of the alternative voices, God is being drowned out a bit at present," Bishop Lawrence Duffy of the Irish bishops' Council for Vocations, told OSV News.

Ordained in 1976, Bishop Duffy trained for priesthood at St. Patrick's College Carlow, one of a string of seminaries across Ireland that no longer offers formation. "The decline has been gradual, from an exceptionally high level of priests historically to a

level today that calls for urgent change," he said.

He believes the church of the future "will be less clerical and less dependent on a priest" as the Irish church moves toward "greater lay leadership." But he underlined, "To say that there are 'no Irish priests' is clearly not true."

A case in point is the Redemptoris Mater Seminary in Dundalk, in the Archdiocese of Armagh, seat of the Primate of All Ireland and the place where St. Patrick is reputed to have built his first church. Last year the seminary, which was established in 2012 to form priests for the Neocatechumenal Way, announced it was building an extension to cater to a sustained growth in vocations.

So far four priests have been ordained from the seminary, and they are now serving in the parishes of the Archdiocese of Armagh and in the Diocese of Dromore. Martin Long, a spokesman for Armagh, told OSV News that another 16 men from six countries (Croatia, Italy, Malta, Poland, Spain and the U.S.) are currently studying for priesthood there.

A number of Irish dioceses have recruited priests from Africa and Asia to serve in their parishes in a bid to counter the collapse in priest numbers. In the Dioceses of Clogher, where Bishop Duffy serves, two priests from Nigeria are currently in parish ministry, out of a total of 48 priests serving in the diocese, several of whom are in their late 80s.

Polish priests are also playing a significant role in most dioceses. Father Stanislaw Hajkowski of the Society of Christ is coordinator of the Polish Chaplains in Ireland and rector of St. Audoen's Church in the Archdiocese of Dublin.

He told OSV News that "at present eight priests are serving Polish communities in Dublin and are involved to a various degree in serving local Irish communities." The total number of Polish priests serving in Ireland is 25.

According to Father Hajkowski, "Polish chaplains support Irish dioceses by providing pastoral care to Polish immigrants in the Polish language." As many as 130,000 Poles are living in the Republic of Ireland and 20,000 in Northern Ireland. "Parents with children attending the Irish schools tend to participate in the life of the local parish more often but still come to the Polish chaplaincies for confessions and major feasts," he explained.

"People really do value their local priest," Bishop Alphonsus Cullinan, chair of the Council for Vocations highlighted in Maynooth March 7. The new vocations drive aims to tap into that goodwill.

Speaking to the Irish Independent at the national seminary in Maynooth, Bishop Cullinan acknowledged that it was "a battle" to promote priesthood in the wake of the church abuse scandals. But he added, "We believe in it and therefore we are going to promote it."