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Irish abuse report demands decisive action

by Thomas P. Doyle



Boys eat in a massive dining hall capable of holding more than 800 students at the Artane Industrial School in Dublin, Ireland, in this undated photo. (CNS)

On Wednesday, May 20, the government of Ireland issued a 2,600-page report on the nine-year investigation into Catholic church-operated schools and reformatories. The report came from the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse and covered a 60-year-period from 1936 to the present. It raised serious questions about Catholic institutions that permitted and fostered climates of sustained abuse by priests and nuns.

U.S. Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle, a canon lawyer and advocate for those abused by priests, offers this reflection on the report.

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Thus far the reaction to the publication of the Report of the Commission to Inquire Into Child Abuse has been quite consistent. Most who have read news accounts of the 30 page executive summary have expressed shock, horror, disgust, anger and other like sentiments. Presuming that the executive summary is exactly that, a *summary* one can therefore presume that the full report is more of the same horror except in more detail.

This report was the end result of a long investigation conducted by a government agency and headed by Justice Sean Ryan. The report's credibility, indeed its very *power* lies with its source. The lengthy investigation was not a private endeavor and certainly not sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church. As if this report is not mind and soul blowing enough, it will be followed on later this summer by the report of the inquiry into sexual abuse by clergy of the Archdiocese of Dublin.

The Roman Catholic Church has been intimately enmeshed with every facet of life in the Republic of Ireland. The Church controlled the education, health care and welfare systems. Every one of the institutions probed by the Commission was run by a Catholic religious order, the two predominant ones being the Christian Brothers and the Sisters of Mercy. Both orders are headquartered in Rome and in Ireland, the activities of each has been subject to the oversight and authority of the Irish Bishops. The young children who are described in the report as the victims of all types of horrific abuse are members of what the Second Vatican Council referred to as the "People of God."

The vicious sexual, physical, emotional and *spiritual* devastation inflicted upon these children was not accidental. It was systemic. It was part of the everyday life and indeed deeply ingrained in the very culture of the childcare system in Catholic Ireland.

The intellects and emotions of decent people, of committed Christians and especially of devoted Catholics cannot truly process the unbelievable reality presented in this report. The sadistic world of these institutions is not that of some crazed secular dictatorship. It is not the world of an uncivilized tribal culture that ravaged the weak in ages long past. This report describes a world created and sustained by the *Roman Catholic Church*. The horrors inflicted on these helpless, trapped children -- rapes, beatings, molestation, starvation, isolation -- all were inflicted by men and women who had vowed themselves to the service of people in the name of Christ's love.

The report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse is not unique though it may well be the most shocking example of the reality of such a culture of evil. In the past two decades over two dozen reports have described physical and sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults by Catholic clergy and religious. Among the more shocking have been a series of reports submitted to the Vatican between 1994 and 1998 revealing **sexual exploitation of religious women in Africa by African priests**. These reports remained largely unknown until they were brought to light by the *National Catholic Reporter* in 2001. Other reports have opened the doors to the secret world of clergy sexual abuse in the U.S. and elsewhere. The report of the Winter Commission about rampant sexual abuse at Mount Cashel, the Christian Brothers orphanage in Newfoundland and the report of the Philadelphia Grand Jury investigation stand out as examples not only of the depravity but of the institutionalized cover-up.

Revelations of various forms of abuse by Catholic religious and clerics all have common elements. Likewise, they evoke responses from the institutional leadership that are common to all examples of abuse and consistent in their nature. Most disturbing is the certain knowledge that the vicious abuse, in Ireland and elsewhere, is not accidental nor isolated and it is never unknown to Church authorities. The Church's authorities, from the pope himself down to the local bishops and religious superiors have known about this unbelievable culture of abuse and have done nothing.

Archbishop Timothy Dolan referred to the Church as a "Loving Mother" when he spoke at his installation Mass in New York. In light of the facts disclosed in the Irish report as well as the information revealed about countless other cases of abuse, such a description of the Church is not only absurd, but insulting to the countless people whose belief and trust in the hierarchy and clergy has been betrayed.

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The official reaction is predictable. Denial, minimization, blame shifting and finally limited acknowledgment followed by carefully nuanced 'apologies' has been the standard fare. At no time has the leadership of any part of the institutional Church ever owned up to any systemic accountability. The standard responses are totally unacceptable because they are devious and irrelevant. Those who still hold to the institutional Church as their source of emotional security may well bray about anti-Catholicism, media sensationalism and exaggeration of what they claim to be an aberration. Such responses are mindless but far worse, they inflict even more pain on the thousands whose lives have been violated.

The Church cannot and will not fix itself. The very reality of the systemic abuse in the Irish institutions (and elsewhere as well) reveals a deep disdain for people by those charged with leading the Church. There has been an abandonment of the fundamental values that are supposed to vivify the Church if indeed these values were ever really internalized by many in positions of power. There is something radically wrong with the institutional Catholic Church. This is painfully obvious because it allows systemic abuse and radical dishonesty to coexist with its self-proclaimed identity as the Kingdom of God on earth.

The institutional Church is defensively changing its approach to the systematic abuse all too slowly and only because it is forced to do so by external forces it cannot control. The Irish government commission is one and the U.S. legal system is another. No amount of bureaucratic programs, pious apologies, rhetorical hand wringing and effusive promises of future change will make the difference. The problem is more than the widespread abuse itself. Punishing the perpetrators is completely missing the forest standing behind the trees. The clerical culture intertwined with the institution needs to be fearlessly examined and dismantled as we know it. It has wrought far too much destruction and murdered too many souls to be tolerated for another generation.

Catholics have a profound obligation in charity and justice to the countless victims of all forms of abuse. They have an obligation to believers of all kinds everywhere. They must ceaselessly do all that can be done to free the Christian/Catholic community from the toxic control of the clericalized institutional structure so that once more the Church will be identified not with an anachronistic and self-serving monarchy but with the Body of Christ.

[Fr. Thomas Doyle served as a consultant to the Dublin archdiocese's commission on abuse by clergy.]

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