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On Anger, Reform and Diarmuid Martin in Ireland

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 8, 2011 All Things Catholic

Dublin, Ireland -- Although the sexual abuse crisis has been devastating for the Catholic church everywhere it?s erupted, the meltdown in Ireland is fairly unique in scope and scale. Catholicism was effectively the state church, running the country?s schools, hospitals and orphanages. As a result, when the church served people well, it had a massively positive social impact -- and when the church failed and abused people, the damage was correspondingly immense.

Add accumulated Irish resentments over clerical power and privilege, plus a generalized backlash against all social institutions related to the recent economic collapse and failures of the political class, and you have a prescription for real angst.

I?m in Dublin this week for a couple of speaking gigs, the centerpiece of which is an April 6-9 conference on the sexual abuse crisis sponsored by the Jesuits? Milltown Institute titled ?Broken Faith: Revisioning the Church in Ireland.? After just three days in-country I certainly can?t pretend to be an expert on what?s happening here, but I?ll toss out these fleeting observations:

- Anger bred by the crisis is never very far from the surface in Ireland, among survivors themselves, inside the Catholic fold, and among a broad cross-section of the general public.
- That anger is fueling some fairly daring visions for church reform. One can debate the merits (even, perhaps, the feasibility) of these visions, but they nevertheless illustrate the ferment in a Catholic community uniquely scarred by the crisis and struggling to come to grips with it.
- Although it takes time to catch on, there?s a striking bit of Catholic locution in Ireland. When someone refers to ?the bishops? or ?the hierarchy,? they generally mean everyone but Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin. In the abstract, one might expect the leader of the country?s largest and most influential diocese to set the tone for perceptions of the bishops. Instead, he?s seen as an outlier for his strong approach on the crisis, including his commitment to holding church leadership accountable.

Anger

There may be no spot on the Catholic map where emotions unleashed by the crisis are as raw as in Ireland. At one stage during the Milltown conference, an Irish priest and abuse survivor named Fr. Patrick McCafferty began to shout while invoking the Biblical image of the ?abomination of desolation.? An audience member asked him to dial down the anger, to which his heartfelt, and transparently honest, reply was: ?I am angry. I am so angry, sorry.?

During my few days here, I didn?t have to go looking for expressions of that anger. Without any effort, they found me.

On Thursday morning, for instance, a small group of protestors took up positions just outside the main gate of the Milltown Institute, brandishing signs denouncing the Catholic church for fielding ?Satan?s worldwide

pedophile army.? I spent about 20 minutes speaking with these folks, all of whom told me they are survivors of abuse, and a couple of whom described in detail what they had suffered. At the policy level, they were concerned about what they see as excessive American influence on the Irish church, in part because Cardinal Sean O?Malley of Boston was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI to run a recent Vatican visitation of the Dublin archdiocese.

When I asked members of the group what would count for them as evidence that the Catholic church had cleaned up its act, one replied it would be seeing Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh in handcuffs. (Brady has drawn fire for his role in a church investigation in 1975, when victims of an abuser priest named Brendan Smyth were required to sign confidentiality agreements.) Two others insisted that Catholicism is incapable of reform, and thus the only solution is to put it out of business entirely.

The group, by the way, is actually called ?Anti-Catholic Church Activists, Ireland.?

Here?s another glimpse of the tenor of the times. On Thursday, I took part in a panel discussion on a popular late-night Irish TV program hosted by renowned local journalist Vincent Browne. Promos for the bit posed the following question: ?Does the Catholic Church have any influence left in this society at all??

One of the testier moments came in a back-and-forth between Browne and a local Passionist priest over whether the Catholic church could be described as composed principally of the ?People of God,? with Browne forcefully insisting that such language is a smokescreen for the reality that ordinary people are seen by the hierarchy as no more than ?sheep?.

Residual anger even broke through during the discussions inside the conference. At one stage, an audience member rose and declared, ?Abuse runs through the entire institution, supported by a fiction of infallibility.? To fix the problem, he said, ?A very large number of sacred cows need to be laicized!?

During my own talk, a man who had earlier identified himself as a survivor of abuse -- and who perhaps felt my analysis was too soft on the pope -- left the room shouting, ?Ratzinger protects pedophiles!?

McCafferty offered another flash of righteous indignation, this time directed at the bishops: ?I wish the bishops were here,? he said ... ?the same men who, like Pontius Pilate, tried to wash their hands? of the crisis.

Anger, of course, is a two-edged sword. It can motivate people to confront injustice, but it can also make rational conversation difficult. Both are as true of Ireland as anyplace else, but the practical reality is that no conversation is possible here that doesn?t acknowledge the emotional subtext.

Visions of Reform

The Milltown event brought together speakers from diverse disciplines, such as theologians, psychotherapists, and social scientists. Despite those differences in approach, most speakers seemed to share a conviction that the church needs a fundamental overhaul.

Marie Keenan, for example, is a social worker and psychotherapist at University College Dublin specializing in child sexual abuse. Based in part on clinical work with priest-abusers, she said that many live ?sex-obsessed lives of terror,? which she said is a product of the organizational culture out of which they emerged.

Simply ?tinkering at the edges of the problem,? she said ? such as creating hotline numbers of victims to report abuse, or making ?small changes to penal and canonical norms? -- won?t fix that underlying defect.

In fact, Keenan hinted, the church is lucky that the crisis isn?t much worse. Given a theology of sexuality which

can fuel ?self-hatred and shame,? she argued, coupled with a theology of priesthood which ?sets them apart in an unhealthy manner,? the question isn?t why so many priests abused; it?s instead why more didn?t.

Strikingly, Keenan said that abuser priests have in some ways been made into scapegoats for institutional failures. They have been ?run out of their homes, welcomed almost nowhere, living in an unknown underworld.?

Before the crisis, she said, the church seemed to prioritize priests over victims, while today things seem to work the other way around. In fact, she charged, both imbalances are expressions of a single deep drive ? to protect the institution?s own interests.

Keenan offered a few concrete proposals:

- A new theology of priesthood. which would treat the distinction between the clerical and lay states as ?more symbolic and less literal?
- A new ecclesiology which would treat Catholicism more as a ?moral and social proposition? and less as a ?power apparatus?
- A serious study of decision-making procedures within the Catholic hierarchy
- Rather than creating its own child safety protection offices and review boards, which Keenan said are fast becoming ?bureaucratic, legalistic, and costly,? the church should simply ?cooperate fully with the state? and independent bodies devoted to promoting child welfare.

In the end, Keenan didn?t seem optimistic about the short-term prospects for much of that happening.

?In the context of the current leadership of the church in Ireland, I see little to give me hope,? she said. ?There?s a lot of talk about renewal, but the church still holds to its old top-down model.?

She warned that Catholicism is ?fast moving towards moral bankruptcy.?
(Keenan, by the way, has a book on the crisis coming out later this year from Oxford University Press, titled *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, Organizational Culture*.)

Bernadette Fahy, a survivor of abuse in an Irish industrial school who went on to co-found an education and support center for victims, struck similar notes. She pointed to a pattern of ?authoritarianism, clericalism, and the idea of a punitive God always ready to pounce? as underlying the crisis.

Fahy was critical of public remarks by O?Malley of Boston during a recent liturgy of repentance in the Dublin cathedral, in which he asked forgiveness in the name of the pope for ?the church?s failures.? Such language, Fahy said, ?adds insult to injury? by refusing to acknowledge ?abuses of power? by the hierarchy itself.

Fahy referred to a 1997 letter to the Irish bishops from the Vatican?s nuncio, which among other things expressed reservations about policies which would require bishops to report allegations of abuse to police and other civil authorities. She said the bishops should have seized that moment to ?take a stand against Rome.?

?They should have all resigned en masse,? Fahy said. ?That would have sent a strong message.?

Instead, she said, when the bishops did not push back, ?Many survivors concluded that all they have suffered does not matter to the hierarchy.?

Like Keenan, Fahy didn?t seem terribly sanguine.

?I do not hold much hope of a strong and reinvigorated Catholic church,? Fahy said, while adding, ?I wait with

baited breath for change.?

Cornelius Casey, acting president of the Milltown Institute, argued that revelations of the ?shoddy and decadent handling? of the crisis point to a need for ?a reinterpretation of the faith and the Christian way of life.?

Casey suggested that the press for such a reinterpretation has been underway for some time, as laity and clergy alike have sought a ?more participatory church.? In recent years momentum in that direction has stalled, he said, but today ?the prophetic voices on the crisis are asking us to resume that journey.?

In response to perceptions that the church is incapable of change, Casey offered two counter-examples: Early Celtic Christianity in Ireland, with its own modes of leadership and internal organization; and the Eastern churches in communion with Rome. Both, he said, ?give hope that further development of that diversity is possible.?

Obviously, these are no more than three perspectives, and they don?t necessarily represent a national consensus. For one thing, the crowd at the Milltown event probably skewed a bit to the center-left, and I suspect the conversation in more conservative circles would be different. I summarize them here merely to indicate the kind of ideas circulating among some thoughtful Irish commentators.

Martin

At the end of the Thursday night TV program, Browne tossed a final question to me: ?What do they make of Diarmuid Martin in Rome?? I said I thought they look upon the Dublin archbishop with ambivalence, admiring his courageous leadership on the sex abuse crisis, but also concerned about divisions with other bishops and some of his clergy.

As the program faded out, an articulate and well-known survivor seated next to me, Marie Collins, interjected: ?He?s the only bishop who has the support of the people!?

For the record, Collins was one of eight survivors of clerical abuse who took part in a foot-washing ceremony with Martin and O?Malley during a ?liturgy of lament and repentance? in Dublin?s Pro-Cathedral in February. The liturgy was designed by victims.

Over and over this week, I had the experience of listening to various folk in Ireland -- fellow journalists, priests and religious, theologians, even cab drivers and security guards -- make observations about ?the bishops.? When I would ask if they included Martin, they would almost invariably say something like, ?Oh, no ... of course, he?s very different.?

In general, this distinction is intended as a tribute to Martin. At a time when the Catholic hierarchy generally, both in Ireland and in Rome, is perceived to have dropped the ball, Martin is often seen as a lone bright spot for his commitment to transparency and accountability. He wins high marks for his outreach to survivors, his cooperation with civil investigations, and his insistence on overcoming a legacy of clerical arrogance.

At the same time, the distinction also reflects a fact of Catholic life here, which is that Martin can be an ambivalent figure among some of his fellow bishops and clergy. The complaint one occasionally hears is that he?s thrown other bishops under the bus, allowing their reputations and integrity to be called into question, and not-so-subtly suggesting they need to go.

Those perceptions of divisions among the bishops have given rise to a question many Irish observers find themselves asking: To what extent will Martin?s approach survive Martin himself?

At 66, Martin could be in charge in Dublin for ten more years, though there?s the possibility he could be moved in the meantime. (A veteran of the Vatican diplomatic corps, he?s occasionally tipped for openings either in Rome or as a nuncio in another country.) The question is whether Martin will be able to institutionalize his vision before he eventually moves on, or whether ten years from now Irish Catholics will still be talking about ?the bishops? and meaning everyone but Diarmuid Martin.

Editor?s Note: Archbishop Diarmuid Martin spoke at a conference on restorative justice and the Catholic clergy sex abuse conference hosted by Marquatte University Law School. *NCR*?s Tom Roberts covered that event. Read his report here: Archbp Martin renews call to examine culture that allowed sex abuse to happen.

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