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Irish Catholicism, from the street and the pew

Arthur Jones | Oct. 11, 2011

Parishioners and visitors attend Mass at a Roman Catholic church in the village of Knock, County Mayo, in this photo taken May 29, 2010. (Newscom/RTR/Cathal McNaughton)

DUBLIN, IRELAND -- Catholic Ireland is bleeding. The Vatican has rubbed in the salt.

The initial pain is from the catalog of clerical abuse, shortly to add yet another shocking report, this time from the Raphoe diocese, which covers most of Donegal. The gaping wound was caused by Rome?s and the Irish bishops? systematic cover-up of abuse.

This -- in the Irish church whose sixth- to eighth-century missionaries evangelized and re-evangelized ?Hibernicized Europe,? that huge northern swath of the continent that, with Italy, anchored Christian Europe for a millennium.

This -- in the Irish church that stamped itself on 19th- and 20th-century Catholic America, and provided the bulk of its nuns, brothers, priests, bishops and cardinals from its millions of Irish immigrants.

This is the Irish church where this year Maynooth seminary admitted 16 seminarians, where once upon a time hundreds of annual ordinands gave rise to the ?foreign-born Irish? -- the ?FBI? -- who stocked Californian and Southwestern rectories.

NCR, in two weeks of conversations in counties Galway, Meath, Antrim, and Dublin north and south of the River Liffey sought to examine Ireland?s agony through the views of Mass-going laypeople -- and priests and nuns who still plow ahead with their daily work.

Some interviewees requested partial anonymity. A couple of thwarted appointments were concluded by e-mail. No bishops were interviewed -- this was Irish Catholicism viewed from the street and pew level. The period spent in Ireland encompassed the Vatican response to Taoiseach (prime minister) Enda Kenny?s full-throated attack on the Vatican?s handling Ireland?s sovereign affairs, and his refusal to back down given the Vatican?s legalistic answer.

?We have been betrayed,? said successful Dublin businesswoman Mary Doyle, a self-described conservative

Catholic and a mother of four, ?and it goes all the way to the top. The trust is gone.?

Irish Catholics? questions and views can be withering.

Over coffee in upmarket Rathgar, south of the Liffey, the Regan sisters, Eleanor and Brenda, were blunt.

?Are there any *holy* men at the top?? asked Eleanor, a mother of two who is preparing her daughter for first Communion. ?Do you remember the movie ?The Thorn Birds??? she asked. ?About the good-looking priest -- but also about a politically-driven hierarchy??

Brenda, a high-powered corporate salesperson and mother of three young children, said, ?Do I hold the bishops or priests in high esteem, or feel honored to talk to them? No.? Still, she wants ?the Ten Commandments for our kids, so they understand there is a deeper meaning to life, that it?s not just the material things.? Would she allow her son be an altar boy? ?No, I don?t think I would.?

North of the river, Róisín, a nurse, wife and mother, hosted a small gathering of parishioners with their pastor around her kitchen table; some parishioners are devotees of Our Lady of Medjugorje, others also supportive of married and women priests.

Said Roisin, ?We looked up to priests. Bishops were our role model. Maybe that was wrong, that we had you all on a pedestal. But this was the worst kind of abuse for us, and the worst people to do it -- because we think you are the holy people in our lives. That?s why it?s so bad.?

Seated next to her, Clare, an elementary school teacher and mother of three adult children, said, ?I do feel the laity and working priests have been let down. It was a huge disappointment to me that Cardinal [Seán] Brady [Ireland?s primate] didn?t resign? when it was shown he had sworn abused children to secrecy. ?If [Brady] had had the courage -- or if he hadn?t the courage and Rome insisted he had to go -- it would have shown we had a serious situation and it would have done an awful lot of good.?

Donal, the 21-year-old music teacher present, painted a bleak picture.

?My friends have no faith. Absolutely none. Not just no faith in God, no faith in anything beyond the universe just being random chance. Abuse in the church has been happening, and that justifies a kind of nihilism. In terms of faith in the Catholic church, absolutely none. Christianity generally, next to none. [Some] maintain the cultural rituals, weddings, baptisms, but it?s only cultural.?

The pastor said there?s hope when young people get married and return to the faith with their children. Donal strongly disagreed.

?It provides a social network, but I don?t believe it?s spiritual,? he said.

?You don?t think they?re engaged in it?? asked Anne, a mother of three grown children -- who sees hope in Medjugorje, in ?adoration? and priests ?preaching the good news.?

Donal replied, ?Absolutely not.?

In Dublin city, Donnacha Maguire, a political aide in his mid-20s, said, ?I still attend Mass regularly, have no real issue with the basic teachings of the church, but disagree with the prohibition on married priests, women priests and bishops. I oppose the way the church demonizes gay people when a large proportion of priests are gay themselves.? Maguire is ?broadly typical of my friends active in politics -- moderately Catholic but increasingly liberal. Outside the church, the hyper-orthodox are on the way out; inside they are being protected and promoted -- and not representative of the Irish Catholic majority.?

?A losing battle?

A gay man, Damian, raised a strong Catholic, feels the church has left him -- stranded. He is still ?culturally Catholic.?

Declan Harmon, 23, also is gay. ?I diverge from most of my peers in that I?m still a Mass-goer, generally in my local parish,? he said. ?I have no qualms about attending the [Anglican] Church of Ireland and accepting Communion. My parents gave up going to church long ago -- I attended alone or with my grandmother. The church would describe me, for my ?lifestyle? -- the church?s term, not mine -- as a ?terrible? Catholic.

?The church is fighting a losing battle in the quest to retain its youngest members. First Communion and confirmation I see as rites of passage? more for ?a party ... than religious piety. For most, the foundations of faith are built on pretense.?

Harmon contended, ?It is a mistake to talk about [Irish] church ?leadership.? It has no leadership. The only bishop with any sort of credibility left is [Dublin Archbishop] Diarmuid Martin, and the way his brother bishops have turned against him tells its own story.?

Later, informally, a senior government official talked of ?the problem democracy, when 95 percent of all Irish children receive a Catholic primary education; 58 percent a Catholic secondary education. The government needs a secular option.?

NCR took the question to Galway, to retired schoolmaster Tom Whyte. He?s always at the local Saturday evening vigil Mass -- so he can make his reserved tee time Sunday morning. He describes fellow Mass attendees as ?mainly white-haired, like myself.? Elementary school students typically receive a half-hour of religious education daily, he said. ?The local bishop is schools? patron, so teachers were hired or fired depending on their orthodoxy.? Though Irish writer John McGahern was famously fired for his first book, ?that wouldn?t happen now, of course,? Whyte said.

He directed *NCR* to Education Minister Ruairi Quinn, who has described the present system as ?malevolently dysfunctional.? Quinn would end church patronage. Before taking office, he called the Education Department either the preserve of ?secret societies such as the Knights of St. Columbanus and Opus Dei ... or incompetent.?

To Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery, the eye of the Irish church?s storm is not, however, education, but the sexual abuse crisis? impact on a laity leaving in droves, and on the honorable priests who remain. ?This summer was the tipping point,? Flannery said. Meeting with Association of Catholic Priests members in Cork and Cloyne, the priests reported parishioners contacting them, saying, ??No reflection on you, Father, you?re doing a good job, but we can?t take the institution anymore.? People are calling them up and canceling baptisms.?

The association originated when Flannery and Columban Fr. Sean McDonagh had completed separate retreats. They talked -- over a glass of whiskey -- about the way clergy generally were being assailed in the media. They called colleagues to gauge interest in forming a priests? group. The resulting Association of Catholic Priests now has 500-plus members out of some 4,000 priests.

Essentially, Flannery said, the association wanted a strong voice for priests in dealing with the bishops and media; instead ?we?ve been inundated by priests whose human rights are being walked on. If an allegation is made against a parish priest today, by tomorrow morning he is publicly disgraced -- very often before he knows the nature of the allegations, therefore before he has a chance to defend himself.?

?Rome is so shortsighted,? Flannery said. ?Is it a Benedict plan or a Vatican ploy to reduce the Western church

to something very small, very committed and engaged [as *NCR* Vatican correspondent] John Allen put it, ?in a cultural war with the world?? That scares the hell out of me. Vatican II was open to the world, in dialogue with the world.? That world, Flannery said, is yearning for an engaged democracy. ?You can already see it in the Middle East. Yet Rome is talking about the church in Africa, South America and the rest, and not looking to that tomorrow. And just wait until the sex crises hit them there.?

Under siege

Noted Irish Dominican Sr. Margaret MacCurtain, who has been a visiting professor at Baltimore?s College of Notre Dame and Boston College, suggested: ?The Vatican does not realize it is in a siege position at the present time. It is rather weak in the ramparts. That probably started with the last pope, but with Benedict XVI it becomes very evident that the appointees to the Secretariat of State and other important Vatican congregations do not have the essential cerebral clout. That?s very serious.?

Compare that, she said, to the Vatican II era?s ?wonderful men -- you had to admire them -- not only the liberals, but that they met their match in the conservatives: Cardinal Michael Browne, the council?s Theological Commission vice president, [and Cardinal Alfredo] Ottaviani, jolly men but their gray matter operating all the time.?

MacCurtain acknowledged the dangers of the Vatican-Ireland diplomatic breach. She reached back to 17th-century Portugal -- left with vacant dioceses for more than 30 years -- and asked (in the light of Kenny?s speech, and the Irish foreign minister, Eamon Gilmore, calling the nuncio to task): Is ?Rome today withholding appointments to Irish sees for what the Vatican might perceive as an affront??

As Ireland?s Catholic tectonic plates shift, no one *NCR* spoke to in Ireland rejoiced in the church?s decline as a moral voice in the society. A severe critic of papal and Vatican posturing, Colm O?Gorman, in 1998, courageously opened wide the actuality of Irish clerical sexual abuse. He said, ?The Catholic church now has very little moral authority in Ireland,? yet he added, ?I don?t actually know that that?s a good thing. I feel really concerned about the fact that, for a very long time, the only place in Irish society that spoke of love in broad terms -- the mutual care and regard we have for each other, the notion of common human solidarity based on love -- has no power any more. There?s an argument, of course, about how real was it in the first place -- but at least it was being talked about.?

Where does Irish Christian hope rest? Not in Rome apparently, but perhaps in the tabernacle at St. Teresa?s, the Dublin center-city Carmelite church known for its midday Mass -- or in other tabernacles like it. Though fewer than 80 people -- including a sprinkling of obvious immigrants -- were present at St. Teresa?s, and though the rapid Eucharist distribution up and down the altar rail was rote, who knows: Was the new Patrick, or Patricia, in the congregation that day?

Perhaps another immigrant -- as St. Patrick himself was -- carries a flame fierce enough to reignite the Holy Spirit-filled fire in an Ireland that once spiritually, religiously, illuminated the world. A spirit that didn?t depend on Rome for advance directives.

[Arthur Jones, *NCR* books editor, was on assignment in Ireland last month.]

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