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Irish priests pledge to 'stimulate a groundswell'

by Michael Kelly

DUBLIN, IRELAND -- Ireland's Association of Catholic Priests marked its first year in existence with a Dublin meeting at which more than 300 priests heard a call for an end to mandatory celibacy and for the ordination of women.

The growth of the association has been rapid, with 540 Irish priests -- or one in eight -- now opting for membership. However, the absence of younger priests, sometimes called the "John Paul II generation," was evident at the gathering.

Fr. Kevin Hegarty, a member of the association's leadership team, told the Oct. 4-5 meeting that what was needed was a church that would open its doors to "married priests and women priests." It would benefit from secular insights, such as those on human intimacy and democracy, he said. It would work at developing a "healthy and holistic theology of sexuality."

Hegarty said that church structures were a barrier to conversation and "despite the promise of the Second [Vatican] Council ... the church in Ireland failed to evolve a strategy that could learn from and contribute to the new consciousness." An authoritarian hierarchical structure "is contemptuous of intellectual challenge and is fearful of leaps of the imagination. The consequences have flowed."

In its first year, the Association of Catholic Priests led opposition to the new translation of the Roman Missal and appealed to the Irish bishops' conference to delay the introduction of the changes. However, the hierarchy dismissed the concerns as "first premature and then irrelevant," Hegarty said.

"In my 30 years as a priest, the sea of Catholicism has receded," he said. "I have heard its long withdrawing roar. ... I have worked in a crumbling church. In 1981 it seemed as if it might be different."

Dominican Fr. Wilfrid J. Harrington, one of the priests attending the meeting, said he was motivated to

join the group because of the betrayal of Vatican II over the past 30 years.

I now know, from our meeting, that Vatican II is not dead. Now I am aware that I belong to a sizable group of priests, diocesan and religious who still believe in Vatican II. And, happily and vitally, not only clergy, but very many lay women and men.

After our [annual general meeting] I confidently expect that membership of the Association of Catholic Priests will grow substantially, Harrington said.

Redemptorist Fr. Jim Stanley told the gathering that the association must now reach out beyond clerical structures. We need to stimulate a groundswell among the Catholic people of Ireland, he said. So begin now to make preparations for a national assembly of people, religious, missionaries and priests. Don't consult the bishops, just go ahead.

The Association of Catholic Priests makes no apology for the fact that it is a liberal group and does not seek to represent all priests. The Association of Catholic Priests does not intend to water down its objectives in order to attract a larger membership, said Fr. Brendan Hoban, another member of the leadership team.

The Irish association has already established links with similar movements. Msgr. Helmut Schüller, leader of the Austrian clergy who have issued an Appeal to Disobedience, was a guest at the meeting, as was Fr. Bernard Survil of the newly formed Association of U.S. Catholic Priests.

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Not all Irish priests who long for reform in the church are enthusiastic about Ireland's Association of Catholic Priests. Fr. Paddy McCafferty, who is himself a survivor of clerical abuse and an outspoken critic of the Irish hierarchy, insists that the group is not prophetic in the true scriptural sense.

He insists that the group cannot claim to be a loyal opposition because it is not loyal at any level and pushing its own agenda all the time.

To be loyal to the church is to expose evil for the good of the church, McCafferty said, adding that he utterly rejects the Association of Catholic Priests as having anything truthful or constructive to offer in the current crises afflicting the church.

The reaction of the Irish hierarchy to the association has been at best indifferent. There were notably mixed opinions at the meeting of the Association of Catholic Priests, with many priests believing that the group must maintain links to the hierarchy while others dismiss relations with the hierarchy as irrelevant.

As the movement looks to the future all are agreed, however, on the necessity of reaching out to laypeople and ensuring that the voice of ordinary Catholics be heard in shaping the future of Irish Catholicism.

[Michael Kelly is deputy editor of *The Irish Catholic*, an independent, lay-owned weekly newspaper.]

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