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Church, Culture and Credibility: A Perspective from Ireland

Ethna Regan

Abstract

This article explores the crisis in the Catholic Church in Ireland in light of the child-abuse scandals exposed in recent reports and outlines some of the theological responses to that crisis. It suggests that it is necessary to examine not just the crimes of the perpetrators of abuse and the inadequate response of individual church leaders but also the structural sin within the Church that is at the root of the crisis. It is argued that the collusion between Church and State in modern Ireland that emerges from these reports can be defined in terms of Hiberno-Christendom, drawing from Charles Taylor definition of “Christendom”. In the midst of the crisis, the ongoing revelations of clerical abuse and the accompanying analysis, there is still pastoral vibrancy and people are trying to cultivate hope. The Catholic Church in Ireland may need to learn how to become what Juan Luis Segundo calls a “creative minority”, re-imagining the parameters of its power and developing a new political theology.

Keywords

Clerical child-abuse, structural sin, Catholic social teaching, Hiberno-Christendom, political theology

When asked to present a perspective from Ireland at the conference on Church, Culture and Credibility, I was conscious that there are many perspectives on these issues within and without the church in Ireland, including the perspectives of the victims who experienced the trauma of child abuse. This article does not claim to represent all these perspectives or to proffer a succinct ecclesiological position that would counter the crisis. What is offered are my own reflections on aspects of the crisis of credibility in the Catholic Church in Ireland, a perspective shaped by listening to a wide variety of people affected by the clerical abuse crisis and by reading the rich range of theological attempts to grapple with this crisis.

A national and ecclesial trauma

The Catholic Church in Ireland is constituted by dioceses in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, with the primatial see located in Armagh.¹ Any discussion of the Catholic Church in Ireland must recognize the all-island nature of the institution, but this article will focus primarily on the publication of reports into child-abuse in the Republic of Ireland, with reference to one cross-border case of abuse, the handling of which drew into the crisis the Primate of All Ireland, Cardinal Seán Brady.

The trajectory of the events marking the current crisis in the Irish church is complex and crowded. Currently most timelines begin with the period in the late 1980s when dioceses in Ireland took out insurance to cover them against allegations of clerical sexual abuse and the first set of guidelines on child-abuse was published by the Irish State. Two reports were published in 2009 which together highlight the key components of the crisis, the narratives of the victims and critique of the response of leaders in the church. The so called Ryan and Murphy reports – named after the judges who chaired the commissions of inquiry – were published within months of each other in Ireland, reports that have resulted in what has been described as a “national trauma”.²

The Ryan Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse highlighted the voices of those who had been abused in institutions run by 18 religious congregations and it is a report dominated by the poignant narratives of victims. Between 1936 and 1970, over 170,000 children were committed to industrial schools, the majority on the grounds of poverty defined as destitution and neglect.³ Historian Lindsey Earner-Byrne holds that “despite widespread contemporary knowledge of the harshness of the regime, these institutions operated, at least partly, for society’s convenience and reflected its rigid class structures and values”.⁴

¹ The territory of the Archdiocese of Armagh and of the dioceses of Clogher, Derry and Kilmore includes counties in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

² The reports are available online: The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (The Ryan Report), available online at <http://www.childabusecommission.ie/> [accessed May 30, 2011]; Report by Commission of Investigation into Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin (The Murphy Report), <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PB09000504>, [accessed August 1, 2012]. The Ferns Report, released in 2005, was the first official Irish government inquiry into the allegations of clerical sexual abuse in the Catholic diocese of Ferns.

³ The Ryan Report, Vol. 1, Chapter 3, p. 41.

⁴ Lindsey Earner-Byrne, “Child Sexual Abuse, History and the Pursuit of Blame in Modern Ireland”, in Katie Holmes and Stuart Ward, eds., *Exhuming Passions: Memory and the Pressures of the Past in Australia and Ireland* (Dublin & Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2011), p. 51. Earner-Byrne also notes: “As Britain began to reform and undo its industrial school system, Ireland clung reverentially on despite many commentators questioning the validity of the system in a state that (in theory) venerated the family

The Murphy report examines the clerical sexual abuse scandals in the archdiocese of Dublin and its devastating critique is directed at the response of church leadership to this abuse. The opening paragraph of the Murphy Report describes the Dublin Archdiocese's preoccupation in dealing with sexual abuse scandals, at least until the mid-1990s: the maintenance of secrecy, the avoidance of scandal and the protection of the reputation of the Church. The recurring grim motif throughout the Murphy Report is "No concern for the welfare of the child" as the report concludes that "the welfare of children which should have been the first priority, was not even a factor to be considered" (Conclusion 1.113).⁵

After the publication of the Murphy Report, the Bishop of Kildare and former auxiliary bishop of Dublin, Jim Moriarty, resigned. He acknowledged that with hindsight he should have done more to confront the prevailing culture in the church. This is one of the few acknowledgments of a cultural problem within the church. Calls for episcopal resignations have since come with the frequency of the Queen of Hearts' call for heads to be removed in *Alice in Wonderland*.

There were calls for Cardinal Brady to resign in 2010 when his role in an internal inquiry in 1975 into allegations of child sexual abuse by Fr. Brendan Smyth became known. Those calls intensified in 2012 when he was accused of failing to take action on a warning by a victim that Smyth was abusing other children. The difficulty with such calls for resignation – albeit appropriate in many cases – is that the focus on individual resignations de-institutionalizes the crisis. As Professor Patrick Murphy argues: "If [Cardinal Brady's] resignation would herald a new culture of openness, honesty and reform in the Catholic Church, then his resignation would do good and he could leave in a spirit of repentance for a great wrong, which was inflicted not just by him, but by the entire Catholic hierarchy".⁶ Cardinal Brady is a good man but his inaction – and that of many

The Irish Free State inherited the industrial school system, and within seven years of its existence it expanded the grounds for committal including non-attendance at school, poverty and neglect." *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵ "The welfare of children and justice for victims was subordinated to the priorities of maintenance of secrecy, the avoidance of scandal, the protection of the reputation of the church and the preservations of its assets." (Murphy Report 1.15) "There was little or no concern for the welfare of the abused child or the welfare of other children who might come into contact with the priest." (Murphy Report: 1.35) "In his dealings with Fr. Edmundus in 1960 he [Archbishop McQuaid] aimed at avoidance of scandal and showed no concern for the welfare of the child." (Murphy Report: 1.37) The Commission notes the "extraordinary charity shown by complainants and their families towards offenders". These "frequently behaved in a much more Christian and charitable way than the Church authorities did". Many indeed expressed concern for the welfare of the priest concerned (Murphy Report: 1.105).

⁶ Patrick Murphy, Opinion Piece, *The Irish News* (May 3, 2012).

other church leaders – is indicative not just of a dysfunctional culture but also of sinful structures in the church.

The concept of social or structural sin is rarely acknowledged as an ecclesial matter but if we take the definition of social sin found in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* – “every sin committed against the justice due in relations between individuals, between the individual and the community, and also between the community and the individual”⁷ – then the failures in procedural justice for victims of child-abuse can be identified as social sin. Pope John Paul II wrote of a kind of “communion of sin”, akin to the communion of saints, a law of descent whereby the sin drags down the church with itself and, in some way, the world.⁸ This concept of a communion of sin captures some of the complexity of cultural and structural sinfulness at the heart of this crisis. *Lumen Gentium* offers a maternal image of the church “embracing in its bosom sinners, [a church] at once holy and always in need of purification”.⁹ Church documents have always insisted that all members, including ministers of the church, must acknowledge that they are sinners. But what if that which offers the embrace to sinners cannot acknowledge the structural nature of its own sinfulness?

The Ryan and Murphy Reports, however, together with the later report on the Catholic Diocese of Cloyne,¹⁰ present a spectrum of cruelty and abuse, of political cowardice, and of complicity between Church and State in modern Ireland. The role of An Garda Síochána (police), the judiciary, medical personnel and child welfare agencies

⁷ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Dublin: Veritas, 2005), no. 118.

⁸ ‘To speak of social sin means in the first place to recognize that, by virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual’s sin in some way affects others. This is the other aspect of that solidarity which on the religious level is developed in the profound and magnificent mystery of the communion of saints, thanks to which it has been possible to say that “every soul that rises above itself, raises up the world.” To this law of ascent there unfortunately corresponds the law of descent. Consequently one can speak of a communion of sin, whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the church and, in some way, the whole world. In other words, there is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family. According to this first meaning of the term, every sin can undoubtedly be considered as social sin.’ *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no. 16. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia_en.html [accessed September 8, 2012].

⁹ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html [accessed September 2, 2012].

¹⁰ Report by Commission of Investigation into Catholic Diocese of Cloyne (The Cloyne Report, July 2011), available online at http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Cloyne_Rpt [accessed September 2, 2012].

in the Irish abuse scandals highlights the broader social responsibility that is only beginning to be addressed. A 2012 report into the deaths of 196 children in the care of the Irish state from 2000 to 2010 concludes that there are probably dozens of those children who would be alive today if the State had properly cared for them.¹¹ Commentators have noted an absence of outrage at this tragedy when compared with the coverage of the scandals in which the church was implicated.

The stark words of the Irish poet Aidan Mathews, written on Holy Saturday 2010, capture the depth of the current crisis:

It is a turning that we turn from in slow-motion,
 Spellbound by our last sight of the twentieth century
 Where Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent
 And a stray went home on all fours to his family.
 Seminaries silent. Churches sold. Priests in prison.
 Children impaled. The annihilated father
 And all that harvest fruit preserved now only
 As pot-pourri in a toilet, an atomised windfall.
 (*The O'Conor Don SJ*)¹²

While Matthews's poetic bleakness overlooks the persistence of hope, it points to the fact that this crisis is not simply an intellectual one akin to modernism or the challenge of secularism and unbelief. The crisis is not something to be faced but is one that Catholics in Ireland *inhabit*. This inhabiting of a crisis makes ethical and theological reflection on the issues involved a real and painful challenge. Firstly, the content of the reports is so disturbing, from the painful narratives of the victims of abuse to the exposed dishonesty of church authorities. Secondly, the crisis is ongoing, with continuing revelations on the known cases and more to emerge in future reports. In September 2012, the audits of four dioceses and three religious orders were published giving evidence of progress in three dioceses.¹³ However there were more grim revelations, particularly in relation to child protection in three male religious congregations. Familiar themes re-emerged: failure to protect vulnerable children and a culture of secrecy that enables abusers to continue to prey thus causing further suffering. The church's own National Board for the Safeguarding of Children in

¹¹ The Report of the Independent Child Death Review Group, by Geoffrey Shannon and Norah Gibbons, available online at http://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/publications/Report_ICDRG.pdf [accessed September 1, 2012].

¹² Published in *The Irish Times*, May 15, 2010.

¹³ The Second Tranche of Safeguarding Reviews undertaken by the National Board for the Safeguarding of Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland (NBSCCCI), September 2012. The Diocese of Cork and Ross fully met 42 of the 47 standards set down by the Catholic Church in its guidance document published in 2009, and partially met the remaining five standards. Available online at <http://www.safeguarding.ie/safeguarding-reviews-2nd-tranche-september-2012/> [accessed September 8, 2012].

the Catholic Church in Ireland (NBSCCCI) said of one congregation that it is “difficult to express adequately [their] failure to effectively protect vulnerable children”.¹⁴ The constancy, breadth and depth of the coverage of church child-abuse can be overpowering, with an ever-present responsibility to read, analyze, lament and protest.

Causes and responses

The immediate aftermath of the publication of the Ryan and Murphy reports was a time for the primacy of the voices of the victim-survivors. However, failures of solidarity and inadequate procedural justice compounded the tragedy and these failures make it difficult for the full picture of justice to emerge. It is only from this primary solidarity with victims that we have the integrity to pursue the complexity of the other justice-issues involved, e.g. the question of broader social responsibility, the wrongful accusations of church personnel or distortions and simplifications in testimonies of abuse.

Initially, there was a tendency by both religious and secular analysts towards mono-causal explanations and one-dimensional responses, with a dominant focus on power issues in the church and inadequate theology of sexuality combined with mandatory clerical celibacy, what Robert Orsi calls “biopolitical interpretations”.¹⁵ Pope Benedict XVI suggested, controversially, in his letter to the people of Ireland, that the causes lay in secularization and a misinterpretation of the programme of renewal proposed by the Second Vatican Council.¹⁶ His reference to secularization was particularly stinging as it is clear that people of secular conviction uncovered the abuse and pursued justice on behalf of the victims while many church leaders erroneously sought refuge in canon law, failing to recognize that child-abuse is not only a moral issue but also a criminal matter.

What has emerged in the past two years has been a growing body of thoughtful theological work which has raised a range of issues pertinent to the universal church and to the church in Ireland, probing the crisis in an effort to understand the complex web of causes and effects and to articulate a hopeful response. A number of significant

¹⁴ Report on the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, Irish Province. Available online at <http://www.safeguarding.ie/safeguarding-reviews-2nd-tranche-september-2012/> [accessed September 8, 2012].

¹⁵ Robert Orsi, “A Crisis about the Theology of Children”, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 30:4 (Spring, 2002), pp. 27–30. Orsi suggests that the roots of the crisis lie in our troubled theology of childhood.

¹⁶ *Pastoral Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of Ireland*, March 19, 2010, no. 4. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20100319_church-ireland_en.html [accessed, August 30, 2012].

conferences have engaged in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary exploration of the crisis.¹⁷ The conversation between theologians and historians is particularly important in the Irish context as it gives a broader picture and deeper understanding of the background to the strengths and weaknesses of the church in Ireland. These academic conferences, together with a number of publications, have sought to put into words some of the dimensions and implications of the crisis, conscious, of course, of the insufficiency of words as a response to the suffering involved. There have also been a number of liturgical and paraliturgical attempts to articulate in word and symbol something of the deeply-felt pain and anger.¹⁸

Marie Keenan's research which draws on the narratives of perpetrators of sexual abuse within the church brings a very particular – if disturbing – dimension to the analysis.¹⁹ She reminds us of the dangerous tendency to dichotomize the problem into victims and perpetrators and of the importance of understanding all the voices involved. Keenan's work has located the abuse of children as part of a broader continuum of other forms of abuse and boundary breaking – in what she describes a cruel and harsh institution – and of the tangled web of sex, power, obedience and clericalism that allowed sexual abuse to occur and the responses to be so inadequate.

My own research has looked at two areas: the relationship between church and state in Ireland and the role of Catholic social teaching in responding to child sexual abuse. Catholic social teaching, our rich reservoir of reflection on issues of justice, must also come under scrutiny in exploring, in particular, the responses to the child abuse scandals and to adult survivors who come forward. Children are “barely visible” in the key documents of Catholic social teaching.²⁰ Children are, of course, barely visible in modern philosophical discourse about justice. In John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*,

¹⁷ “Church: A Culture of Abusive Relationships?”, Conference of the Irish Theological Association, March 18–19, 2011; the “Broken Faith, Re-visioning the Church in Ireland” conference held in the Milltown Institute, April 6–9, 2011; and, taking a different approach, the interdisciplinary conference on “Childhood in Irish society”, organized by the School of Theology and the Department of Irish Studies of Mater Dei Institute, Dublin City University, April 18–19, 2011.

¹⁸ “Crying unto Heaven: A Liturgy of Lament”, held in the oratory of the Mater Dei Institute, Dublin, in August 2010, was broadcast on national radio. Available online at <http://www.irishcatholic.ie/site/content/crying-unto-heaven-liturgy-lament> [accessed, August 30, 2012]. The “Liturgy of Lament and Repentance for the sexual abuse of children by priests and religious” in St. Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Dublin, February 20, 2011, was prepared principally by survivors.

¹⁹ Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organizational Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁰ Ethna Regan, “Barely Visible: The Child in Catholic Social Teaching”, paper delivered at “Childhood in Irish Society: An Interdisciplinary Conference”, Mater Dei Institute, Dublin, April 18, 2011.

individuals in the “original position” – heads of families, rational and self-interested agents – do not know in what position they will find themselves in the society whose principles of justice they seek to construct, and therefore could be a child. However despite this caveat in their construction of justice, children are not treated significantly in Rawls’s conclusions about a just society. Children are barely visible in most contractarian accounts of justice, as are the poor, thus moving towards invisibility those who are both child and poor.²¹ The child is rarely considered the locus of justice. The general principles of Catholic social teaching in regard to justice were seldom appealed to in responding to the abuse and remain largely absent in the treatment of victims.

Donal Dorr outlines nine weaknesses or lacunae in the Catholic social teaching tradition, including the question of justice within the church itself.²² The only major document in the tradition that deals explicitly with this is the 1971 synodal document *Justice in the World*. This document clearly states that the right and duty of the church to proclaim and demand justice on the social, national and international levels needs to be accompanied by a witness to justice “in Church institutions themselves and in the lives of Christians”. The document calls on the church to undertake an examination of “modes of acting” within the church itself, recognizing “that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes”.²³ There is a need for an ecclesial ethic – not simply the important guidelines for child protection – but a deeper teleological ethic of church.

While Dorr identifies as “perhaps the biggest lacuna . . . its failure to provide an adequate treatment of the issue of justice for women”, one could add to this list of lacunae, as already mentioned, the lack of consideration of children in the tradition. This neglect, combined with the lack of attention to the area of justice within the church, left the issue of child abuse largely outside the scope of Catholic social teaching. The issue of justice, both judicial and restorative, will be an on-going concern for the church and it is imperative that the principles of Catholic social teaching guide this work of justice.

It is clear that a dialogue between psychology and theology is necessary in order to understand adequately the issues of moral agency, personal responsibility and sinfulness in relation to perpetrators of

²¹ A *Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1971). Rawls, influenced by the cognitive-development theories of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, treats children in terms of their moral development and their capacity to acquire a sense of justice.

²² Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching*, rev.ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), pp. 369–77.

²³ *Justice in the World*, pars. 36, 40. Official text in English available online at http://www.osjspm.org/majorloc_justicia_in_mundo_offical_test.aspx [accessed August 30, 2012].

abuse. To focus on the institutional dimensions of the crisis is not to deny the importance of questions of personal agency and responsibility, but the psychological dimensions are outside the limits of my expertise. Many of the causes of the crisis lie deeply embedded in a range of theological difficulties and ecclesial practices and the unraveling of these complex causes is a messy but crucial and long-term project. Despite initial suggestions, including some by senior members of the Catholic Church in England, that this is a particularly Irish problem, subsequent revelations of clerical abuse in other European countries have shown that this is not the case. Nonetheless, the Irish church has to examine what particular factors were involved in our own experience of child-abuse crimes and scandals. The crisis that has emerged from the totality of the child-abuse scandals is a theological and ethical project for the universal church but one that must also be inculturated by the Catholic Church in Ireland.

The project of Hiberno-Christendom

What was the relationship between church and society in post-Independence Ireland that enabled this collusion? Reflecting on this particular question brought me back to an essay by Charles Taylor. In *A Catholic Modernity?* Taylor holds that the affirmation of radically unconditional universal human rights in modern liberal political culture could never have emerged from Christendom, a civilization where the institutions and culture are meant to reflect the Christian nature of society.²⁴ Taylor notes that Christendom had its benefits, but it also wed a coercive political structure to the gospel in a way that did not trust the Holy Spirit, but the sword. Such a society, Taylor suggests, might have difficulties in accepting full equality of rights for atheists or for those who violate the Christian moral code, e.g. homosexuals. He concludes that the reason for these difficulties lies not within Christianity itself, but within the particular project of Christendom through which the Catholic Church had created the authoritative background in which European governance was set and that the demise of this project of Christendom was beneficial for both freedom and faith.

Christendom can be understood as a society centred on a hierarchical church which orders and gives meaning not only to religion but also to cultural and intellectual life, to family and education, to economy and politics. This ordering of Church and society has a comprehensive moral vision and thus creates a comprehensive

²⁴ *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, ed. James L. Heft (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 17.

community with all the benefits and strengths that such a community offers, but one where the “other”, the different, the dissenter, is vulnerable to mere toleration or to exclusion.

The Ryan and Murphy reports have uncovered a collusion of church and state in modern Ireland, a collusion born of a relationship that could be defined, using Taylor’s term, as Hiberno-Christendom. Taylor notes that Christendom had its benefits, so too the project of Hiberno-Christendom. The contribution of the Catholic Church to education, healthcare and social services, while not devoid of classism, reflected both solidarity with the poor *and* a commitment to building a just society through the provision of such services. However it could be argued that the move towards the consolidation of a Catholic Irish identity in newly independent Ireland resulted in a coercive Hiberno-Christendom. It is not suggested here that this was the only operative ecclesiology or that Irish Catholicism was reducible to Hiberno-Christendom, but this is a way of interpreting the relations between church and state that enabled the collusion.

The roots of the light and shadows of Hiberno-Christendom can be traced to the nineteenth-century and, in particular, the influence of Paul Cardinal Cullen not only on the Irish church but also through what Colin Barr calls Irish episcopal imperialism shaped by Cullen.²⁵ While not wishing to locate blame for twentieth-century abuse in the nineteenth-century, it is legitimate, as Diarmuid Ferriter argues, to see Cullen as the individual who “created many aspects of the governance and style of an Irish Catholicism that was, in the long run, exposed as too rigid, lacking sufficient humanity and too subservient to Rome”.²⁶

The development of this kind of Catholicism in Ireland was followed in the period after *Rerum Novarum* by the crisis of modernism which resulted in a contraction of Catholic intellectual work on social justice in the church generally under Pius X who, according to Marie-Dominique Chenu, was particularly concerned with ensuring hierarchical and clerical control over all kinds of “Catholic Action” concerned with social reform.²⁷ This concern is evident in episcopal engagement with lay Catholic action in Ireland in the first half of the twentieth-century. The watchword of Catholic action organizations, which were established or developed in the early decades of

²⁵ Hiberno-Romanism was itself a subset of a wider neo-ultramontanistism that swept the Catholic Church in the nineteenth-century. See Colin Barr, “‘Imperium in Imperio’: Irish Episcopal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century”, *English Historical Review*, Vol. CXXIII No. 502 (June, 2008), pp. 611–650.

²⁶ “Rome’s formidably obedient servant”, *The Irish Times* (September 10, 2011), review of *Cardinal Cullen and his World*, edited by Dáire Keogh and Albert McDonnell (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011).

²⁷ Marie-Dominique Chenu, *La ‘doctrine sociale’ de l’Église comme idéologie* (Paris: Cerf, 1979), pp. 29–30.

the twentieth-century, was ‘vigilance’, vigilance on behalf of and at the behest of the Catholic Church. These organizations influenced censorship, social legislation and the policies of the political parties.²⁸

In the midst of this hyper-vigilance towards some social and moral matters, the industrial and “reform” schools developed as independent republics of cruelty and classism. Lindsey Earner-Byrne holds that the absence of “a vibrant culture of ‘civic morality’” had disastrous consequences for those on the margins “particularly as the established moral watchdogs of Irish society were so implicated in its worst failings”.²⁹ This combination of inadequate civic morality and the contraction of Catholic intellectual work on social justice had devastating consequences for the poorest in Irish society.

The project of Hiberno-Christendom, akin to Taylor’s critique of Christendom, was not sufficiently hospitable to the “other” in terms of religious belief or to those who violated the Christian moral code. However, the revelations of recent years have shown that those who suffered most were vulnerable, mainly poor, children. Despite extraordinary work with the poor by many religious communities, the power-dynamics of this church-state collusion exposed in the recent reports gave evidence of a kind of disdain for the poor, a disdain evidenced not only in the abuse narrated in the Ryan report, but also in the number of working-class parishes mentioned in the Murphy report. This last factor was very striking but it did overshadow to some extent the fact that there were middle-class victims of clerical sexual abuse.

The audit of one congregation published in 2012 highlighted the previously neglected area of clerical sexual abuse in fee-paying schools, thus challenging any solely class analysis of church child-abuse in Ireland as it is now evident that privileged children were also at risk.³⁰ Serial abusers were moved between schools and countries, and inadequate intervention meant that some continued to abuse for more than a decade. The primary concern was the reputation of the school and victims were to be sacrificed for this end. The response to this disclosure of abuse in Catholic schools which have educated doctors, politicians, senior members of the judiciary and other members of the establishment has been more muted than the outrage expressed at the revelations of the Ryan Report.

²⁸ Maurice Curtis, *A Challenge to Democracy: Militant Catholicism in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: The History Press Ireland, 2010), pp. 204–5.

²⁹ Lindsey Earner-Byrne, “Child Sexual Abuse, History and the Pursuit of Blame in Modern Ireland”, p. 67. [see note 4]

³⁰ Review of the Irish Province of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, available online at <http://www.safeguarding.ie/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Spiritans.pdf> [accessed September 8, 2012].

The special position of the Catholic Church in independent Ireland – although not an established church – wedded a particular understanding of natural law to a nationalist politics (to be understood, of course, in the context of Irish history), producing a coercive political structure whose demise has been beneficial, to use Taylor's terms, both for freedom and for faith.³¹

The famous speech of *An Taoiseach* Enda Kenny in the Dáil after the publication of the report on the diocese of Cloyne last summer, albeit directed to the Vatican and not to the Irish church, may be looked on as the final blow to the consensus between church and state that marked Hiberno-Christendom.³² However it must be noted that the “special relationship” between the church and state in modern Ireland had already changed in the 1980s under Kenny's predecessor Garrett Fitzgerald and the “special relationship” between Ireland and the Holy See had, as Dermot Keogh describes it, “withered away”.³³ Critics saw Kenny's speech as undiplomatic and intemperate, inaccurate and misleading, a speech calculated to maximize political capital. The most serious criticism is that he gave permission to others to be “reckless with the truth”, a truth which is sufficiently awful not to merit such recklessness.³⁴ However the speech cannot be simply

³¹ This emphasis on the oppressive nature of the Catholic Church in post-Independence Ireland is often accompanied by a forgetfulness of our history of having an established church, the (Anglican) Church of Ireland, which was disestablished in 1869. Enda McDonagh notes that the churches in Ireland – North and South – often behaved as if they did have some established status, despite the fact that after 1869 there was no established church. “Church and State: The Case of Ireland”, *New Blackfriars* (September 1989).

³² Statement by the Taoiseach on the Dáil Motion on the report of the Commission of Investigation into the Catholic Diocese of Cloyne, in Dáil Éireann, 20 July, 2011: “The revelations in the Cloyne report have brought the Government, Irish Catholics and the Vatican to an unprecedented juncture. It is fair to say that after the Ryan and Murphy reports, Ireland is, perhaps, unshockable when it comes to the abuse of children. However, the Cloyne report has proved to be of a different order because for the first time in this country a report on child sexual abuse exposes an attempt by the Holy See to frustrate an inquiry in a sovereign, democratic republic as little as three years ago, not three decades ago. In doing so the report excavates the dysfunction, disconnection and elitism that dominate the culture of the Vatican to this day. The rape and torture of children were down-played or managed to uphold the primacy of the institution, its power, standing and reputation. Far from listening to evidence of humiliation and betrayal with St. Benedict's “ear of the heart”, the Vatican's reaction was to parse and analyse it with the gimlet eye of a Canon lawyer. This calculated, withering position is the polar opposite of the radicalism, humility and compassion on which the Roman Church was founded. Such radicalism, humility and compassion comprise the essence of its foundation and purpose. This behaviour is a case of *Roma locuta est: causa finita est*, except in this instance nothing could be further from the truth.” Available online at <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2011/07/20/00013.asp> [accessed August 30, 2012].

³³ Dermot Keogh, *Ireland and the Vatican: The Politics and Diplomacy of Church-State Relations 1922–1960* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), pp. 366–369, p. 369.

³⁴ Andrew McMahon, ‘The Politics of Child Abuse’, *The Furrow* (November, 2011), pp. 602–615, p. 606.

dismissed as injudicious politicking, for Kenny spoke not only as a wily politician but also as a devout Catholic. The Vatican, as Marie Keenan argues, “has never acknowledged its role in the problem of clerical sexual abuse in Ireland or that in 1997 it obstructed Irish bishops who were trying to deal with clerical perpetrators in difficult circumstances, trying to develop rights policies and practices for responding pastorally to victims, deal justly with perpetrators, and ensure that such abuses would not occur again”.³⁵ Kenny’s speech may have been marked by a triumph of rhetoric over accuracy but there is no doubt that it captured the sentiments of many people in Ireland and their perception of the role of the Vatican in the abuse scandals. It is symbolic of an utterly changed landscape in church-state relations in Ireland.

Beyond Hiberno-Christendom

The fading of the project of Hiberno-Christendom predates the current crisis, for in the years since Vatican II a new relationship between the church and the world was being forged by the creative pastoral and thoughtful academic work of many people in Ireland. New understandings of social justice and of cultural and religious pluralism were enabling a mature departure from the church of Hiberno-Christendom. It must be noted that while this new theology was very critical of some of the distortions of Hiberno-Christendom, it too was insufficiently vigilant about the underside of Irish society and therefore did not see the reality that was to emerge so brutally.

However much of this work has been overshadowed by the recent crisis in which many of the bishops reverted to the presuppositions of Hiberno-Christendom in their dealings with the scandals. This has resulted in an accelerated demise, marked by an unprecedented loss of integrity and trust, and the growth of what might be termed “reactive secularism”. There are calls for the church’s influence to be purged from all roles in education and healthcare and there is a strong lobby to silence any contribution by the church in the public square. A church which at times set the boundaries of the freedom of minorities now finds itself challenging potential political decisions in the defence of its own religious freedom. Any attempt to privatize religion or exclude faith-communities from public discourse needs to be challenged in the interests of a legitimate democracy and the common good, but the challenge for the Catholic church in Ireland is to do this in a different way from the politics of Hiberno-Christendom.

³⁵ Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*, p. 195.

The cultivation of hope

The poet priest Pádraig J. Daly in a poem entitled *In the light of "Ryan"*, captured something of the impact on people of the unrelenting scandals:

We huddle in our upper room,
The doors bolted,
For shame at our betrayal
Of all that is tender.
To our place of infamy, come,
Jesus, come.³⁶

There is no doubt that we continue to experience shame at "our betrayal of all that is tender", but it would not be true to say that the doors are bolted. It must be emphasised that throughout this present crisis, "this place of infamy", there is still considerable pastoral vibrancy and efforts to build community are received positively. Growing numbers of people study theology, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and other Catholic organizations represent the poor with credibility, and faithful individuals, families and communities live lives of quiet, quotidian witness to the gospel. Recent research by Gladys Ganiel of Trinity College, Dublin indicates that what is occurring is a process of "de-institutionalisation" and that Irish Catholics are cultivating some hope by participating in what is termed "extra-institutional" spaces.³⁷ These include Catholic organizations, traditional religious orders and parish pastoral councils. These "extra-institutional" spaces are perceived as operating differently to the institutional Catholic Church. Ganiel cautions that "we should hesitate before making any grand claims about the importance of these extra-institutional spaces".³⁸ We cannot be sure how many Catholics are actually involved nor how effective these spaces will be as seedbeds for renewal and re-reformation. "At the very least, Catholics who are engaged in extra-institutional spaces have developed perspectives and insights that could, with the right opportunities and nurturing, contribute to wider discussions about reform within the institutional Church."³⁹

However what has emerged very clearly in the past few years is a profound disjunction between the culture of the majority of the

³⁶ *Afterlife*, Dublin: Daedalus Press, 2010.

³⁷ See "Loss and Hope in the Irish Catholic Church: Part I", *Doctrine and Life*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (April, 2012), pp. 16–27 and "Loss and Hope in the Irish Catholic Church: Part II", *Doctrine and Life*, Vol. 62, No. 5 (May–June, 2012), pp. 35–46. Ganiel describes "de-institutionalisation" as a sociological process linked to the wider processes of modernisation, secularisation and globalisation.

³⁸ Ganiel, "Loss and Hope in the Irish Catholic Church: Part II", p. 46.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

leaders of the church and the *sensus fidelium*. A 2011 survey carried out by the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP) found both high levels of Mass attendance and high levels of criticism of the leadership of the Catholic Church in Ireland.⁴⁰ The *sensus fidelium* was most evident in response to calls from bishops for repentance. These were met by broad-based anger, particularly from lay people who resented being asked to atone for sins they did not commit and for cover-ups they were previously unaware of. This is compounded by the perception of laicization-as-punishment in the context of these scandals. Pope Benedict's Pastoral Letter "to the Catholics of Ireland" opened with the salutation: "Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Church in Ireland", an overarching inclusion of the ordained and lay, male and female rarely acknowledged in ecclesiastical text or practice. The letter expressed Benedict's conviction that "the Church in Ireland must first acknowledge before the Lord and before others the serious sins committed against defenceless children", which is an undifferentiated apportioning of blame that is not matched with an inclusive apportioning of responsibility for reform and renewal. As Fainche Ryan says, "We are part of the sin but rendered no power or voice in the attempt to change the structure which enabled the sin to remain hidden for so long."⁴¹

Although expressed in diverse ways, the mind of the faithful in relation to a failed leadership-culture ranges across the "conservative-liberal" divide, marking a shared ethical indignation and shaken faith. This conjunctive *sensus fidelium* offers a *leitimos* moment for church renewal, an opportunity for dialogue about fundamental reform in a less polarized manner. There is a real challenge for theology at this point in the history of the church to forge a dialectical rather than oppositional approach to some of the difficult issues that divide us, recognizing that facing these issues is imperative for the future of the church and, more importantly, our service beyond the boundaries of church to the Reign of God.

Future challenges

The truth is that no ecclesiology has been written that provides an adequate framework for this particular crisis. We can, however, learn from historical responses to other ecclesiastical crises. There are

⁴⁰ The ACP was founded in 2009 to be a voice for Irish priests, particularly in promoting Vatican II reforms and now has more than 800 members. Their survey, carried out by the market research company Amárach, found that more than a third (35%) of Catholics go to Mass once a week and more than half (51%) attend once or more each month.

⁴¹ Fainche Ryan, 'Why were we silent? The role of the "simple faithful" in Ecclesial Structures', *Doctrine and Life* Vol. 60, No. 8 (October, 2010) pp. 15–26, p. 24.

crucial glimpses in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, glimpses that have become reality to varying degrees in different local churches. But it is also true that the insights of the Council did not guide the responses to the events that precipitated this crisis. The Catholic Church in Ireland may need to learn how to become what Juan Luis Segundo calls a “creative minority”.⁴² Images of church forged in the context of persecution on account of the struggle for justice may not, of course, be sustainable in the context of hostility experienced as a result of betrayal of trust. Discourse about becoming a smaller, more committed church is a source of hope, but this discourse is also vulnerable to focussing not on a creative minority but on an entrenched elite. In some of the discussion about the silencing of Irish priests who have raised issues about reform of the church, there are hints of a rigorist neo-Donatism that argues that if one cannot abide by the rules, then one can leave.

There is a need for a new political theology in Ireland, one that emerges from a church that re-imagines its relationship with the state, a political theology more in the tradition of J.B. Metz who urges a political theology constituted by memory, narrative and solidarity and in which the church, too, is subject to critique. For Metz, it is the remembrance of the victims of history, whose story is the underside of all history, which will give to memory its critical and liberating power. Christians are mandated to *anamnesis*, to unforgetfulness: “the Bread of Life is the food of mourning – mourning defined as the opposite of apathy – nourishing the capacity to be hospitable to the sufferer”, strengthening the impulse to solidarity without which memory and narrative remain abstract categories.⁴³ The guiding question for Christian solidarity, according to Metz, is: what happens to others, especially those who suffer?⁴⁴

Asking this guiding question opens the way for a church that is vigilant about the underside of our society and our world, and that acts in solidarity from that vigilance. It may be the starting-point for a new ecclesial self-understanding that enables us to be convicted about our principles but modest about our power to influence, that offers intellectual and spiritual depth while fostering attentive listening and dialogue with difference. For the Catholic Church in Ireland, the time ahead is marked by many challenges: the challenge to cultivate hope even as it is marked by shame; the challenge to re-imagine the parameters of its power; the challenge to move out of the

⁴² *The Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), p. 209.

⁴³ Ethna Regan, *Theology and the Boundary Discourse of Human Rights* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), pp. 114–133, p. 121.

⁴⁴ J.B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (London: Burns & Oates, 1980), p. 232.

shadows of Hiberno-Christendom to a more authentic Christianity; and the challenge to transform our enforced marginality into redemptive liminality.

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