

Church News Ireland

Media Review

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Mystery over Sinn Fein newspaper's £24k party donation

Sinn Féin's newspaper An Phoblacht made a £24,000 donation to the party last year which was worth more than the value of all financial assets held by the publication, Bill Breathnach writes in Sunday Life

Records from the UK Electoral Commission show that Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland received £24,089 from the publication in July of 2023.

At the time, this was worth €28,868, however accounts show that the publication's entire financial holdings never exceeded €25,321 in 2023.

Although affiliated with Sinn Fein, An Phoblacht is owned by Parnell Publications, a private company with an address at 58 Parnell Square, Dublin. The donation was attributed to it.

Electoral laws in the Republic prohibit parties from accepting donations of more than €2,500 from any single company in a calendar year. However, there is no such limit on donations received in Northern Ireland.

There is also confusion as to how the Parnell Publications accounts documented zero turnover for 2023.

The paper's own website says An Phoblacht continued to operate, publish and sell copies throughout that year.

Accounts show that at the start of 2023, Parnell Publications held assets worth €25,321. However, the company had expenses also worth €25,321 throughout that year.

Parnell Publications was left with financial assets totalling zero at the end of 2023 but continued to publish this year.

Another Sinn Fein-affiliated company attracted searing criticism from an Irish government minister last month.

Republican Merchandising Ltd, which trades as the Sinn Fein Bookshop, was reported to have donated £129,089 to Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland in 2023.

Fine Gael TD and the Republic's Minister for Enterprise Peter Burke said that the revelations illustrated the “murky nature of financing” in Sinn Fein.

“Pearse Doherty, who wants to be minister for finance, needs to account for how the donating bookshop can spend €92,000 on 'raw materials' and over €260,000 in 'other expenses' and how they can make assets of €28,000 vanish from one year to the next.”

Sinn Fein also came under the scrutiny of SIPO, the Republic's political financing watchdog over expenditure in the Republic's local elections this year.

The party said it spent just over €7,500 in its campaign, compared to declared expenditures of €206,000 and €290,000 for Fine Gael and Fianna Fail respectively.

A SIPO official reportedly told Sinn Fein that they had incurred “a disproportionately low level of expenditure” compared to the other large parties.

Sinn Fein later stated that it had “sought advice” from SIPO as to “whether our declared election expenditure has been allocated correctly”.

Both Parnell Publications and Sinn Fein were approached for comment. Neither organisation issued a response at the time of publication.

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Joe Biden to meet Pope in final foreign trip as U.S. President

The White House has announced that United States President Joe Biden will visit Italy in January, where he will meet with Pope Francis and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to discuss global peace efforts and various international challenges, the Catholic Herald reports.

In its Dec. 19 statement, the White House said Biden, who will step down Jan. 20, when Donald Trump is inaugurated to his second term in office, will travel to Rome from Jan. 9-12 to meet separately with the pope, Meloni, and Italian President Sergio Mattarella.

Biden's audience with Pope Francis will be Jan. 10, it said, saying the meeting will be an opportunity to "discuss efforts to advance peace around the world."

Meetings with Meloni and Mattarella will also "highlight the strength of the U.S.-Italy relationship," and will be an occasion for Biden to thank Meloni "for her strong leadership of the G7 over the past year and discuss important challenges facing the world."

The announcement of Biden's visit came after he and Pope Francis spoke over the phone Thursday, with a separate White House readout saying that the two discussed "efforts to advance peace around the world during the holiday season."

Biden also thanked the Pope “for his continued advocacy to alleviate global suffering, including his work to advance human rights and protect religious freedoms,” the readout said, saying the pope invited Biden to visit the Vatican in January, and Biden accepted.

The last time Pope Francis and Biden, the United States’s second Catholic president, met was in June when they participated in a G7 summit in Bari, Italy.

During that meeting, the White House said Biden and Francis discussed the wars in Gaza and Ukraine.

“The leaders emphasised the urgent need for an immediate ceasefire and a hostage deal to get the hostages home and address the critical humanitarian crisis in Gaza,” a White House statement said.

Biden, whose visit comes just days before the end of his term, was present for the start of Pope Francis’s papacy, when in his capacity as vice president he led the United States delegation at Francis’s inaugural Mass.

The Cof E can’t afford to lose another Archbishop

Many readers, I suspect, feel so dismayed by the current hierarchy of the Church of England that they will support yesterday’s ambush by the BBC, which is trying to prevent Stephen Cottrell, the current Archbishop of York, from taking up his role as interim

Archbishop of Canterbury. I think that would be a mistake, Charles Moore writes in the Daily Telegraph.

The case against Archbishop Cottrell concerns his time as Bishop of Chelmsford. He allegedly failed adequately to act against David Tudor, a priest in his diocese with a past conviction for child abuse. It echoes accusations which were brought against Justin Welby, who recently resigned as Archbishop of Canterbury because of his alleged failures in the handling of the case of John Smyth, the sadistic evangelical missionary who beat boys in the name of God.

For other reasons, neither archbishop has endeared himself to the person in the pew. Both wanted to shut churches during Covid. Both seemed more concerned to take down so-called “monuments to slavery” and root out “unconscious bias” than to help parish life flourish, so they demoralised congregations.

But it does not follow that Christianity will benefit if archbishops can be kicked out like football managers.

First, there is the question of fairness. Neither archbishop is accused of iniquity, but of mishandling. The Church has indeed made dreadful mistakes about child abuse, but it must be acknowledged that the problems involved are extremely complicated, concerning the legal rights of both victim and accused. Accusations cannot simply be accepted: they must, in justice, be proved. (It was a failure to check the facts which caused Archbishop Welby falsely to accuse the late Bishop George Bell of Chichester of abuse.) Responsibility does not necessarily lie at the door of the most famous person involved.

Having read the Makin report on the Smyth case, for example, I am convinced that its case for the personal responsibility of Justin Welby is weak. The evil deeds John Smyth committed in England date from when Mr Welby was in his teens and twenties. Besides, Smyth was not a clergyman nor employed by the Church of England. The Smyth case was peculiarly horrible: it does not follow that a scapegoat for that evil must be found.

Second, there is the underlying mission of the Church to consider. Certainly that mission can never be convincing if it is unable to root out abuse, but it is also certain that if factions in the Church can work off grudges by evicting bishops, there will be no end to the destructive power of odium theologicum. The strength of the Church of England is its tolerance – not of wrong, of course, but of difference. These internal wars will destroy that.

Poor Archbishop Welby, never the most diplomatic of men, managed to annoy two factions at once – the pro-gay lobby which is obsessed with overturning the Church's teaching that marriage is between a man and a woman, and the anti-same-sex marriage lobby of his evangelical former friends who feel he deserted them on the subject.

Jesus famously invited those who are “without sin to cast the first stone”. There cannot be a bishop of the Church of England who has not made delicate judgments about safeguarding issues. Will all those judgments have been correct?

The Bishop of Newcastle, Helen-Ann Hartley, has been throwing plenty of stones at the archbishops. Even before her attacks on Welby and Cottrell, she had also denied Permission to Officiate in her diocese, where he resides, to Lord Sentamu, the former Archbishop of York – again because of an alleged failure of safeguarding when he was in office.

Yesterday, I telephoned the Diocese of Newcastle because it has at present no safeguarding officer, and its previous officer left accompanied by a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA). The diocese says it has an interim safeguarding officer. I got no substantive reply about the NDA. According to the Church of England press office, the national institutions of the Church do not use NDAs, so it would be interesting to know if Bishop Hartley is out of line on this.

It has just been announced that Lord Evans of Weardale, the former head of MI5, is to be chairman of the Crown Nominations Commissions which will recommend the next Archbishop of Canterbury to the Prime Minister. I fear that, in this untrusting climate, his surveillance skills could well prove relevant.

Charity will not accept Welby's donation

The Children's Society charity has said it will not accept a Christmas donation from outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, the Daily Telegraph reported

Mr Welby and his wife Caroline said this week that they had chosen to donate to the charity, which they noted "works

with children affected by criminal and sexual exploitation, abuse” and other issues.

In a statement yesterday, Mark Russell, chief executive of the charity, said: “After careful consideration, we have respectfully decided not to accept the donation offered by the outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury.

‘There is an urgent need for the Church of England to reset its approach to safeguarding’

“The Children’s Society is deeply committed to supporting the survivors of abuse; our teams support victims of child sexual abuse, and this means that accepting this donation would not be consistent with the principles and values that underpin our work. We were profoundly shocked by the findings of the Makin review, and our thoughts are with all survivors of abuse. We believe that there is an urgent need for the Church of England to reset its approach to safeguarding and continue to create a safer church and safer spaces for young people, protected by real accountability and a culture of care.

The Archbishop announced his resignation last month after an independent review found that he had a “personal and moral responsibility” to do more to stop the Church’s most prolific serial abuser, John Smyth. The Makin review said that Smyth subjected his victims to traumatic physical, sexual, psychological and spiritual attacks, permanently marking their lives.

Smyth died aged 77 in Cape Town in 2018 while under investigation by Hampshire Police, and was “never brought to justice for the abuse”, the Makin review added.

A Lambeth Palace spokesman said: “Lambeth Palace respects the decision made by The Children’s Society.

“The Archbishop of Canterbury shares the principles and values of The Children’s Society and is committed to supporting the survivors of abuse and victims of child sexual abuse.

“He applauds The Children’s Society for their tireless work in this field.”

The Archbishop will leave his post on Jan 6 and he is not expected to take part in any public Christmas services before then, including the traditional Dec 25 sermon from Canterbury Cathedral.

Speaking to the soul

Short reading and a prayer - daily on this site

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