



FROM THE ARCHIVES -

McQuaid has been betrayed by his own voluminous archive

In the John Charles McQuaid story lies the awesome power of the Catholic Church in Ireland in the mid-twentieth century, writes John Cooney, in the Irish Times JMon, Apr 7, 2003

The unexpected death 30 years ago today of Archbishop John Charles McQuaid deflected a group of Protestant churchmen from taking the historic step of sanctioning radical measures to eradicate sectarian bigotry in the North and to promote an inclusive pluralist society in the Republic.

It was around lunch-time on Saturday April 7th, 1973, that word of the death of the most powerful Roman Catholic prelate of the 20th century reached the Protestant church leaders who were engaged in tense talks with the most

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senior official of the World Council of Churches, Dr Philip Potter.

Just as Potter, a Methodist from the Antilles, was pleading for ecumenical detente with the Catholic Church, the proceedings at Errig House in Greystones, Co Wicklow, were interrupted abruptly when one of the churchmen was summoned to the phone.

A few minutes later Alan Buchanan, the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, rushed back into the room and announced in his strong Monaghan accent, "Archbishop McQuaid is dead. Archbishop McQuaid is dead." Instantly, the Church of Ireland Primate of Armagh, George Otto Simms, the Presbyterian, Jack Weir and the former Methodist President, Eric Gallagher, stood in silent prayer with Buchanan for the soul of John Charles. It was a spontaneous act of spiritual homage from the Protestant leaders to the undisputed champion of Catholic supremacy.

Observing this remarkable event as The Irish Times religious affairs correspondent, I was puzzled by such a show of reverence. Even in death, McQuaid cast a heavy shadow. On Buchanan's suggestion, the Protestant church leaders sent a telegram of sympathy to Archbishop Dermot Ryan, who 15 months earlier had succeeded McQuaid. More importantly, they postponed a decision to invite Catholic observers to the Irish Council of Churches. It was as if the ghost of John Charles chuckled at this proof of Protestant indecision.

Unknown 30 years ago, however, was how McQuaid's death was neither serene nor peaceful. For 15 months he had brooded in his Victorian Gothic mansion in Killiney on

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how he had been dumped by Rome for not adapting to the changed religious scene after Vatican II. His physical demise, at the age of 77, was triggered off by media briefings sanctioned by Archbishop Ryan, revealing that the diocesan finances were in chaos.

In effect, Ryan was using the media to suggest that his predecessor had brought the Dublin diocese to the brink of bankruptcy. McQuaid, who had ruled for decades through instilling fear, was now himself terrified at being named in the next day's Sunday Press. He felt powerless to defend himself.

According to close friends, it was this anxiety that contributed to the strain which precipitated early on the morning of April 5th the first of two heart attacks. In accordance with his own wishes, he was rushed by ambulance to nearby Loughlinstown Hospital. There he suffered his second attack within an hour of admission.

Knowing that his end was approaching, he rose up from his pillow and asked a Roscommon nurse if he had any chance of reaching heaven. The nurse told him that if the Archbishop of Dublin could not get to heaven, few would.

This calmed him and he died some time after 11 a.m.

Tragically for him, had the archbishop been taken to the better- equipped St Vincent's Hospital in Donnybrook, his dissecting abdominal aneurysm could have been operated on and he could have lived for many more years, according to his half-nephew, Dr Paul McQuaid.

Archbishop Simms set the tone of the obituaries by recalling McQuaid's "wonderful care for the poor and his

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great concern for individuals". Most of McQuaid's critics, who had demonised him as a reactionary figure in the last third of his reign from 1962, politely noted that he had been more in sympathy with the age prior to Pope John XXIII.

Commentators highlighted his controversial role in the Mother and Child dispute with Dr Noel Browne in 1951. Despite his shyness, he was judged to have been the prelate who had made the greatest impression on the country since the days of Archbishops Croke and Walsh. Some even compared him to the towering ecclesiastical figure of the mid-nineteenth century, Cardinal Paul Cullen.

Generally, there was a consensus that McQuaid's death marked the end of the era of Renaissance-style prelates.

Officially, the President, Eamon de Valera, was "deeply grieved" to hear the news. In the privacy of Loughlinstown Hospital Dev wept over the corpse of the Holy Ghost priest on whose behalf he had lobbied the Vatican in 1940 for elevation to the See of Dublin and the Primacy of Ireland.

Although their relationship at times was strained, both men co-operated to control people's lives for so long in a closed and puritanical society which the writer Sean Ó Faoláin memorably decried as a "dreary Eden".

After McQuaid was buried under the High Altar in Dublin's Pro-Cathedral, he was quickly forgotten, as his successors struggled, unsuccessfully in the end, to fend off what became known as "the liberal agenda".

None of his successors, Dermot Ryan, Kevin McNamara and Desmond Connell, has exercised the enormous

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spiritual power, let alone the almost unbounded temporal power, which he commanded.

It was not until the publication in 1987 of the de Valera papers relating to the drafting of the 1937 Constitution that the extent of McQuaid's power began to be fully appreciated.

These papers showed how McQuaid, as president of Blackrock College, collaborated closely with de Valera in drafting the fundamental law of the State.

Even more importantly, the opening of the McQuaid archive a decade later, in 1997, revealed a homespun spy system which had won the admiration of the head of the FBI, the legendary J. Edgar Hoover.

A control freak, McQuaid mobilised government Departments, Dublin Corporation, and the medical, legal and teaching professions to defend "Catholic Ireland" from the liberal wiles of The Irish Times, Trinity College, and the Communist Party.

In the McQuaid story lies the awesome power exercised by the Catholic Church in Ireland in the mid-twentieth century.

McQuaid represents both the high point of Catholic power and an index by which to measure the subsequent decline of the Catholic Church's influence in society.

Like the tapes which brought down Richard Nixon's presidency, McQuaid left too much on record in his voluminous archive that casts him in an unfavourable light. The 700 boxes of letters show how elected politicians shamefully bowed to his crusade to rid "Catholic Ireland" of dissidents, Jews and especially Protestants.

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Moreover, since McQuaid's death the stream of revelations about physical and sexual abuse by clergy in church institutions has shown that these evils were an integral part of the Catholic Church even in his day. Within the Dublin diocese, priests who served under McQuaid have been now brought before the courts and found guilty on charges of horrendous sex acts against children in church care.

Thirty years on, it is time for the present Government to order the gardaí to trawl the McQuaid archive and investigate the extent and the roots of clerical child sex abuse. Until this is done, the McQuaid legacy will continue to haunt the Irish Catholic Church.

John Cooney is the author of John Charles McQuaid, Ruler of Catholic Ireland and was the Irish Times religion correspondent



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