



CNI

CNI PRESS WATCH

As Catholic influence in Ireland wanes, some hope abortion will be legalized

Bronagh Matthews, an office manager in her 30s, lives on the rural edge of North County Dublin. She attended an all-girls Catholic high school and a Catholic college and still identifies as Roman Catholic, Karen Huber writes on RNS.

But Matthews fancies herself the “hatching, matching and dispatching” variety, offering a whimsical summary of her current Mass attendance, which primarily involves baptisms, marriages and funerals. She also favours abortion rights “not because I agree with it, but because I think it should come down to the individual choice of the woman,” and feels Ireland could do with less interference from the Roman Catholic Church.

She’s not alone.

Ireland metaphorically barred the door on the church's influence on public policy when citizens voted overwhelmingly for the legalization of gay marriage in 2015, making it the first country in the world to do so by national referendum. Now some devout Catholics fear that door may be locked after a [Citizens' Assembly](#) — a deliberative body of people randomly selected from across the country — recently recommended liberal changes to Ireland's abortion laws.

Currently, abortion in Ireland is only legal if the pregnant woman's life is at risk, including risk of suicide. Each year, more than 3,000 women travel to the U.K. to terminate pregnancies.

Public opinion on abortion has long been evolving. A grass-roots movement (known as Repeal the 8th) to overturn an amendment to the Irish Constitution giving equal human rights to both a pregnant woman and her fetus gained enough momentum to call the Citizens' Assembly to order.

The Assembly's recommendations, which are nonbinding: 87 percent of the 100 members voted that the eighth amendment "should not be retained in full," and 64 percent voted that abortion without restriction should be lawful.

Some groups, including Evangelical Alliance Ireland — a nondenominational Christian organization — vocally oppose the legalization of abortion on demand and reject a common conception of the issue in civic discourse.

“We are concerned that the debate over the Eighth Amendment is being deliberately misrepresented as a false narrative of a battle between young liberal progressives and an older generation of backward conservative religionists,” the EAI wrote to the Citizens’ Assembly.

“This false narrative conveniently sweeps very real Human Rights concerns under the carpet.”

The recommendations of the Citizens’ Assembly are just one step toward potential abortion legislation. Debate among politicians may take months. The Assembly’s advice will go to a parliamentary committee made up of a handful of members from each party. If there is a referendum, it will likely take place in early 2018 — a referendum that could accelerate the evolution of Irish politics away from the church.

Throughout the relatively short history of the Irish Republic, church and state have governed private, public and spiritual spheres hand in

hand. More than 90 percent of national schools are run by a local parish. A twice-daily call to prayer can still be heard on television and radio. And Good Friday remains the holiest of holy days, with a (much-disputed) nationwide ban on the purchase of alcohol.

But in recent years, chinks in the armor of Catholic Ireland have begun to appear.

Divorce was legalized in 1996.

Nondenominational schools are gaining in popularity and have yearslong waiting lists. And several scandals involving the Catholic Church — widespread clerical abuse, the [Magdalene laundries](#) and most recently the mass grave of human infant remains uncovered on the grounds of a Catholic-run, state-sponsored home for mothers and babies — have increased wariness, if not outright rejection, of institutional religion.

Statistically, Ireland is becoming less Catholic. According to the 2016 census, those identifying as Roman Catholic fell to 78 percent, a decrease of 6 percentage points since the 2011 census. Now 1 in 10 Irish people claim to “have no religion,” making the so-called nones the second-largest religious group in Ireland.

These recent figures, together with the Citizens’ Assembly recommendations, the legalization of

gay marriage and the rise of nondenominational schools, have stirred debate among religious leaders. Some decry the growing secularization of Ireland, while others see the country coming to honest terms with its beliefs.

“Things have taken a bit of a turn,” said Scott Evans, an author and chaplain at University College Dublin. “Obviously, these aren’t necessarily new things, it just so happens that they’re kind of coming together. But you do notice a bit of a backlash on social media, people kind of sensing this fear that Christianity is on the wane. There’s a loss of power, there’s a loss of influence.”

The Iona Institute, a Catholic advocacy and research group that campaigned heavily against the marriage referendum and repeal of the eighth amendment, believes Ireland remains more Catholic than it lets on, despite the Citizens’ Assembly results.

“A lot of them fall into the spiritual (but) not religious camp,” David Quinn, head of the institute, told state-owned RTÉ Radio One. “The vast majority of people in Ireland still believe in God, even if they don’t go to church.”

Michael Nugent of Atheist Ireland argues that the Irish people have moved away from the Catholic

Church, but “the institutions and the laws haven’t moved on.”

But the more secular Irish stand to make unprecedented gains in future months and years. If they do, a Catholic Ireland may still exist, but those who no longer toe the party line on religious dogma may be the ones to define the nation’s future.

As Donal O’Keeffe, columnist for Irish paper [The Avondhu](#), writes, “For the rest of us, the a la carte, Bouncy Castle Catholics,” — referring to the ubiquitous main attraction at Communion and confirmation parties across the country — “we need to think about what sort of a country we have and what sort of a country we want.”

+++

First published on RNS - Religion News Service,
May 2017

Karen Huber is a freelance writer living in Dublin

+++