CNI

PRESS WATCH - The state of the Catholic Church in contemporary Ireland

The Ireland celebrated by G.K. Chesterton in his *Christendom in Dublin* is no more, writes Professor John P McCarthy in The Catholic World Report.

He discussed that city during the 1932 Eucharistic Congress, when ceremonies were attended by hundreds of thousands and the Irish military provided escorts for papal representatives disembarking from a ship. Four years later, an Irish constitution, composed by Eamon de Valera and approved by plebiscite the following year, had in its preamble a reference to the Trinity and specifically acknowledged Catholicism as the religion of most of the population (while also acknowledging other faiths, including the Jewish community, in Ireland). The constitution reflected Catholic social thought, including the assertion of

property rights, familial authority over the education of children, and the indissolubility of marriage. Furthermore, there was an unofficial but actual deference by public figures to the Catholic hierarchy, not only in their public appearances but also in their positions on certain issues.

Now all that is gone. The constitutional reference to Catholicism and the other religions was removed, with hierarchical approbation, by plebiscite in 1973. Legislative prohibition on the sale of contraceptives was gradually softened (first, by stipulating they could only be purchased by married couples with doctor's prescription—what one especially manipulative Irish politician praised as "an Irish solution for an Irish problem"), and then ultimately removed.

St. John Paul II's visit to Ireland in 1979 evoked the last popular manifestation of the "Christendom" spirit that Chesterton had noted. Admittedly, during the decade that followed the visit, on two occasions, the Irish electorate took an adamantly Catholic position. In 1983 an overwhelming majority approved an amendment to the constitution prohibiting abortion and giving the right to life of the mother and of the unborn child equal status. Three years later, a similar-sized majority rejected an amendment

that would have allowed divorce (and on much more restricted grounds than are comparable in the United States and most of the Western world).

However, within a decade a supreme court decision and referenda began to turn things around. In 1992 the court overturned an injunction preventing a young girl, who had been raped and was considering suicide, from being taken to England for an abortion. Subsequently, the electorate approved amendments allowing the freedom to travel abroad for an abortion and the distribution of literature indicating where abortions could be obtained, and rejected one asserting the inappropriateness of abortion in the case of threatened suicide. Three years later the electorate approved, in a very narrow vote, an amendment allowing divorce, again on grounds narrower than in the United States or most other Western countries.

About the same time there was a perceptible decline in Church attendance and in religious vocations. In the middle of the 20th century Irish vocations were of such extraordinary proportions as to allow many Irish religious to serve as missionaries or as supplementary support in less well-staffed dioceses in other parts of the English-speaking world.

What had happened to weaken the religious enthusiasm of so many Irish? Obviously a very major factor in distracting young minds from religious concerns was the substantial economic modernization and prosperity that had come to Ireland beginning in the 1960s.

As late as the 1950s Ireland had shared the undesirable distinction with East Germany and North Vietnam of suffering consistent population decline, a result not of lessened birth rate, but of emigration. Ireland was one of the poorest countries in Western Europe. But things began to turn around, beginning in the 1960s, and intensifying later. There were brief interruptions, such as the mid-1980s, but prosperity returned with vigor in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

A less-acknowledged explanation of the current sparsity of religious vocations in contrast to the abundance in the mid-20th century might be the mixed motives of many of the earlier ones. Economic considerations could have been as much a factor as religious devotion, especially on the part of aspirants' families. Some men attended preparatory and even full seminaries primarily to get an inexpensive secondary- and university-level education at a time when only elementary education was tuition-free in Ireland.

The confused interpretations and implementation of Vatican II—which the then-archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, mistakenly assumed would have minimal effect in Ireland—had the same traumatic effect as elsewhere in terms of a decline in vocations, withdrawal from the priesthood and religious life, and lessened church attendance.

Many rushed to attribute the decline in religious faith among many Irish as a reaction to the notorious clerical scandals that came to light in the 1990s, many of which had in fact occurred in earlier decades. Perhaps the most notorious case was that of the then-bishop of Galway, the late Eamon Casey, who had fathered a child years before as bishop of Kerry. But more disturbing than clerical affairs with adults, of which there were several, were the numerous instances of sexual abuse of children and teenage boys.

Admittedly there is a long history of sexual sin by Catholic clergy, including a Borgia who was later elected as Pope Alexander VI (and whose grandson, Francis Borgia, became the successor to Ignatius Loyola as leader of the Jesuits and was canonized). But, particularly in the modern era, these were relatively few and Church authorities, to minimize scandal, exercised

internal discipline and moved the offending cleric elsewhere, or else excluded him from the clergy. But there seems to have been a disproportionately large number in the second half of the past century—especially in Ireland. A possible explanation might be in the number of faulty vocations mentioned earlier. Admittedly only a small percentage of the total clergy were involved, although that scarcely excuses it.

The Church, especially in Ireland, was slow to react and hesitant in cooperating with external agencies in publicizing the abuses. Ultimately the media prompted public authorities to conduct formal inquiries, with which the Church cooperated. Records demonstrated that clerical abuse seems to have disappeared, as most of the incidents occurred one or many decades ago. In addition, the hierarchy seems to have bent over backwards to cooperate, as complaints about priests are immediately given over to the public authorities, and often the accused clergymen are suspended pending determination of guilt. The Association of Catholic Priests, a group with members scarcely deferential to hierarchical authority or even Church teaching (on issues such as gay marriage, divorce, contraception, and so forth), has complained about the unjust denial of the rights of accused priests. Significantly, there

have been successful libel suits by defamed clergy, even against the Irish public television station.

But to return to the decline in religious observance in Ireland, it is doubtful that reaction against clerical abuse was the major cause, even though many who do not go to church will use that as a rationale. More than likely it was the transformation of the public mindset by a prevailingly liberal, if not libertine, media and the secular spirit of the universities and many educators at all levels of schooling.

As is often the case, political figures became outspoken about the issue of clerical abuse well after the problem had come under control. A classic example of this was a speech given on July 20, 2011 in Dáil Eireann, the Irish parliament, by the relatively recently-installed Taoiseach, or Prime Minister, Enda Kenny. He used a report by a public commission on complaints of clerical abuse in the Diocese of Cloyne in County Cork—most of which had occurred before 1996 and one that dated from the 1930s—to launch a full-scale attack on the Church and the papacy that would have made Orange zealots in Northern Ireland proud.

Even though he had been the leader of his party since 2002, Kenny had, until this point, very little to say about the issue, which had been prominent in the Irish media for about 15 years. Now he interpreted the report as exposing “an attempt by the Holy See to frustrate an inquiry in a sovereign democratic republic.” He went on to condemn “the dysfunction, disconnection, elitism—the narcissism—that dominate the Vatican to this day” and pictured “the rape and torture of children” having been downplayed “to uphold instead, the primacy of the institution, its power, standing and ‘reputation.’” Riding the wave of media anti-clericalism, Kenny used a problem generally well under control to insist he would not be intimidated by “the swish of a soutane” or “the swing of a thurible.”

Shortly after, the Irish closed their embassy to the Holy See, which was one of the first independent sovereign entities with whom Ireland had diplomatic relations. Within a couple of years, wiser heads prevailed, as the government took the advice of senior current and former Irish diplomats and restored an Irish embassy to the Vatican. However, it was not surprising that the second Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, in 2012—which, admittedly, was a much lower-key affair than that of 1932—was not attended by Pope Benedict XVI.

In 2015 another referendum on a constitutional amendment took place that gave clear evidence of the weakened position of the Church in the Irish popular mind. The amendment, which legalized same-sex marriage, was proposed by a Citizens' Assembly. That body consisted of a random group of individuals selected by a public opinion agency. When presented with the proposal, most of the members of the elected parliament and the government acceded and advanced the measure to a referendum stage, but avoided direct responsibility as its champions. The media was generally enthusiastic in its support, and there was substantial foreign (primarily American) financial support for the "Yes" campaign, which succeeded, paradoxically, with almost the same proportions as the anti-abortion and anti-divorce causes in the 1980s.

A similar Citizens' Assembly (which meets on weekends over a period of several months) is currently considering, among other subjects, a repeal of the existing amendment against abortion. The government defeated efforts by some in the Dáil to introduce a repeal in the legislature itself by convincing proponents that it would be more appropriate to leave the issue in the hands of a Citizens' Assembly. That approach would spare the more mainline

politicians the responsibility of promoting the repeal, but allow them to passively acquiesce in a measure that, if originating in the Dáil, might prompt opposition from many in their constituencies. While all sides can submit views on the issue to the assembly, one cannot help but believe the managers of the assembly will advance the repeal of the existing prohibition.

The government had already passed legislation allowing abortion in cases of threatened suicide by a pregnant woman, although the numbers of such procedures being performed have remained very few. However, significant numbers of Irish women have opted to travel to Britain for terminations. Many in the pro-life camp are pessimistic about things yet are hopeful that, even if abortion is legalized, many restrictions on the procedure will be maintained. They hope that legalization in Ireland will not be followed, as in so many other places, by abortion-on-demand. In other words, Ireland might yet preserve those restraints that the American right-to-life cause has successfully restored in so many states.

Another issue confronting Ireland is religious education. The elementary schools in Ireland are almost entirely national (i.e., public) schools. State-supported elementary education started in Ireland in the 1830s, well before it was

established in Britain. Most of the schooling existing before had been schools run by the Church of Ireland (the church of a minority, but which included most of the wealthier and propertied classes) and private and quasi-legal hedge schools run by Catholics, hardly capable of serving most of the Catholic population. In the late 18th century, legal restrictions were removed from the establishment of schools by Catholics. New religious orders, including the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Sisters, began to start many schools, but achieved nothing near universal education.

The state schools were originally to have been non-denominational, but Protestant opinion demanded that they have a religious curriculum, obviously of a Protestant character. A solution was found putting the schools under the management of local clergy, whether Protestant or Catholic, with their own respective religious instruction. After political independence in the 20th century, the population statistics in the 26 counties of Ireland had become overwhelmingly Catholic, as had most of the schools. However, Protestant, Jewish, and, more recently, Muslim national schools also exist. Also, catering to either secularist or multi-cultural families, “Educate Together” Schools have started in which the religious curriculum is of more a

“comparative religion” than a denominational character.

The Irish constitution stipulated that the parents have primary say in the religious instruction of their children, whatever school they attend. For instance, non-Catholic children need not attend the religious classes in a Catholic national school. In most of the Catholic national schools there is no difficulty, especially since many schools in rural areas have plenty of space for non-believing children. A problem arises in urban areas, especially Dublin, where schools are often over-crowded. There, the priest managers, when confronted with a surplus of applicants, resort to requiring baptism as a criterion for admission. If the overwhelming majority of the parents of attending children have no objection to their children receiving Catholic instruction, there should be no problem, it would seem. The families opposed to Catholic instruction should be provided with schools that would met their tastes, rather than deprive the majority of what they want for their children. If it means children have to travel a bit further for schooling, that would be no different than it is for the children of the Protestant, Jewish, or Muslim schools, which, being fewer in number, are more widely scattered. Naturally if the decided majority of families with children attending a Catholic school

do not want religious instruction, then in that case the Church should divest its control over that school.

Another, probably more serious, problem arises from the state's control over school scheduling and curricula, or more specifically, the time allotments for different subjects. Increasingly the amount given for religious instruction has been reduced. Furthermore, the syllabus is more and more of a comparative-religion flavor. In fact, one senses, even before syllabi changes, many, if not most, Catholic national schools concentrated on sacramental preparation—with ceremonial rather than doctrinal emphasis—and on little else. That fact that many Irish children and parents look upon First Communion and Confirmation primarily as coming-of-age ceremonies is borne out by the irregularity or complete absence of so many from church attendance between the day of their First Communion and that of their Confirmation.

There are less scientific, but valid, indices of the diminished position of Catholicism in contemporary Ireland. One is the secularization of the video that accompanies the ringing of the Angelus bells on the national television station, not to mention the many calls for its complete suspension. Another is the almost total

disappearance of what had been a common habit of the Irish—whether as pedestrians or as passengers in a car or bus—of blessing themselves when passing a church.

Recently, the president, the Taoiseach, cabinet members, opposition party leaders, and Dublin city-government officials failed to attend the funeral Mass for the late Cardinal Desmond Connell, who had been archbishop of Dublin from 1988 to 2004. Admittedly the cardinal, who had spent most of his life as an academic, was outspokenly orthodox, not especially agile in dealing with media, and slow to respond to the crisis emanating from reports of clerical sexual response. But the absence of official attendance was quite uncharacteristic of Ireland.

Hopefully, a Church exercising a dedicated minority position might prove to be more vital than a Church that had rested on unchallenged —but probably insincere—laurels from public officials or the media. A cynic might also suggest that the intensity of Irish Catholicism in the past century might have been prompted less by religious devotion than by nationalism. Fear and repression of Catholicism had been central to the British control of Ireland, and Irish separatism was reinforced by Catholicism. One hopes and prays, even if it is a minority position

and one subject to harassment, that “the faith of our fathers” will live again in Ireland.

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