



CNI

COMMENT - Anti-feminism a bigger issue for Church than celibacy

The billboard at Belfast airport spelt out the words sun, sky and ski. A better résumé of my few days in the Mediterranean would have been sun, sex and church - writes Denis Bradley in The Irish News.

Sun drenched days in a little cove overlooked by a medieval Spanish church, a nudist beach of young and far from young gay men mingling with mothers, fathers and children, with and without beach wear, playing in the warm waves of the glistening sea. Joy filled days and nights best captured when all and sundry danced together to a ten piece band under a moon lit sky. In that place and in that atmosphere it was easy to relax into a state of prayer and praise of the God of creation.

Up in the little church, the parish priest liked to sing. A pleasant structure coarsened by guilt and

gold; a reminder of a colonial past when state and church colluded with each other in plundering other countries and peoples.

The early Sunday mass was attended by older Spanish ladies and a handful of men who took most of the prominent roles in the celebration. It echoed the book I was reading which argued that Christianity was based on very rigid gender roles. Women were subordinated to men as far as leadership went, but were viewed as spiritually superior to men and were sent by God to restrain and civilise them. The book questioned the standard thesis that the decline, even the free-fall, in church attendance was due to 'secularisation' but rather to the churches' resistance and hostility to the feminist revolution.

The gender issue, like the gay issue, is based on a particular reading and interpretation of the Bible without reference or cognisance to a particular stage in social evolution.

The unfortunate and still prominent view that every word in the Bible is the dictate and the will of God is probably most strong in the Protestant churches but ironically reached its zenith in the Catholic Church's resistance to even discussing the acceptance of women into the clerical ministry. The result has been that millions of

women have walked away to find their spirituality elsewhere. Millions of others have an ear to the inevitable coming debates about gender and leadership before they make up their minds to go or to stay.

The anti-feminist attitude and its potential to reduce all the churches to small, fundamentalist sects is a thesis with which I have great sympathy and which is more pertinent to Catholicism than to the shallow argument about celibacy and married priests which, incidentally, is now being supported by retired bishops who said nothing on the issue when they were in power.

On my trip home I bought an Irish newspaper to be confronted by a photograph of protesters at the gay pride march in Belfast with banners describing people on the march as whores and sinners. Sad and crude, but, in some ways, less depressing than the response of the Presbyterian churchman to the Alliance party decision to embrace same sex marriage in their policy manifesto.

On radio and in response to a gay woman who had clearly been deeply hurt by her church's attitude to her sexuality, the clerical voice deepened and mellowed in apology for any hurt

caused. And then the crunch. We love and embrace you as a human being and welcome you at all times into the community but you must understand that the Bible has decreed what is right and what is wrong and the condition that you have (separate from you as a person, you understand) is an abomination.

The Spanish stole the gold and the right wing of the churches have stolen the Bible. I and millions like me are more than capable of arguing the magnificence of the Bible and its importance in religious understanding and history.

Those same millions can argue and debate the falsity of literally interpreting the scriptures outside of their historical context – to believe the earth was flat was the limited understanding of the time. But many of those millions have already walked away. They too probably have an ear to the coming debates which will decide the religious questions of gender and homosexuality and biblical interpretation.

The little Spanish church overlooking that beautiful little cove will either become a hive of activity, reflecting the struggles and the hopes of those who live and those who visit there or it will become just another museum to a once powerful institution.

