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Reclaiming the Irish Church

Mark DOOLEY

Philosopher, journalist, broadcaster

Abstract

The Irish Catholic Church is still coming to terms with its dark past. In a series of probing and controversial articles for the *Irish Daily Mail*, former lecturer in Philosophy at NUI Maynooth Dr Mark Dooley uncovered a culture of clerical disobedience at the heart of the seminary system in Ireland. Those articles became the basis of his book *Why Be a Catholic?*¹. “Reclaiming the Irish Church” sheds further light on the seminary system and the Irish Episcopacy, arguing that both need radical restructuring if the Church is to reclaim its moral standing. Only when the seminaries are fit for purpose, and when the Episcopacy is radically reformed, will the Irish Church overcome its past and offer fresh hope for the future.

Keywords: Irish Catholic Church, society and religion, Public debates

Résumé

L'Église catholique irlandaise est encore aux prises avec son passé sombre. Dans une série d'articles d'investigation publiés dans l'Irish Daily Mail qui ont défrayé la chronique, l'ancien professeur de philosophie à l'université de Maynooth Mark Dooley a révélé une culture de désobéissance clérical au cœur du système de formation des prêtres. Ces articles ont été la source d'inspiration de son livre Why Be a Catholic? Le présent témoignage apporte un éclairage supplémentaire sur le système de formation des prêtres et sur l'épiscopat irlandais, et montre qu'ils ont besoin d'une restructuration radicale pour que l'Église retrouve son autorité morale. Ce n'est que lorsque les séminaires rempliront leur mission, et lorsque l'épiscopat sera réformé en profondeur, que l'Église catholique irlandaise pourra tourner la page et être source d'espoir pour l'avenir.

Mots clés: Église catholique d'Irlande, société et religion, débat et sphère publics

It is now more than 20 years since Irish Catholicism experienced a cataclysm that would presage an unprecedented crisis in the Church. I refer to the shocking revelation that, in 1992, the Bishop of Galway Dr Eamon Casey had fathered a son. In the years that followed, the Irish public would be exposed to a litany of horror, which would not merely undermine the moral and spiritual authority of the Church, but strip it of its standing within Irish society. Revelation after shocking revelation pointed to a widespread culture of abuse among the Catho-

1. Mark Dooley, *Why Be a Catholic?*, London, Continuum, 2011.

lic clergy. Even the Church's staunchest defenders were forced to concede that something unspeakable had happened. In the words of Benedict XVI, it seemed as though the Irish Church was mired in "filth".

For those of us raised in the shadow of the Irish Church, such revelations were profoundly disturbing. I was educated by the Christian Brothers, served Mass and took for granted the all-pervading presence of Catholicism in Irish society. Indeed, the fact that there were so few areas of life untouched by the Church is what made the abuse crisis so incomprehensible. Catholicism was central to our identity as a nation. Hence, when the edifice began to crumble, so too did our sense of self.

Now, it is true that this problem is certainly not unique to Ireland. A similar crisis – both in scale and gravity – afflicted the American Church at the end of the nineties. There is, however, one significant difference: as a cultural force, Catholicism never had the impact in the United States that it had on Ireland. It never dominated American life the way it did in my country. For us, Catholicism percolated into every crevice of our culture, which explains why its collapse was all the more shocking and sensational. And if we are only now coming to terms with *why* it happened, it is because it has taken two decades for the painful truth to come to light.

Much has been written on the possible causes and antidotes to this crisis. Some analysts argue that clerical celibacy was to blame, and that a married priesthood must now be a priority. Others suggest that undue deference towards the Church resulted in people turning a blind eye to abuse. More insist the Church was not rigorous enough in enforcing its own standards. As is widely known, there have been claims of cover-up and collusion with Rome. Some commentators even assert that Pope John Paul II should not have been canonised because of claims he refused to crack down sufficiently on clerical abusers. In recent years, the Irish Government has responded by straining to breaking-point diplomatic relations with the Holy See. And while the mood has changed since the election of Pope Francis, much remains to be done in order to re-establish harmony between the Irish Republic and the Vatican.

As it happens, my approach to these complex matters is very different to other Irish commentators. That is so because, at a certain point, I found myself in a situation which gave me a unique insight into the institutional failures of the Irish Church. In 2006, I was offered a lectureship in the Philosophy Department at NUI Maynooth. Prior to this, I had spent ten years lecturing at University College Dublin, again in Philosophy. My time at UCD coincided with Dr Desmond Connell, the then Professor of Metaphysics at UCD, becoming Archbishop of Dublin. Cardinal Connell, as he is now, is a man of uncommon kindness and cultural refinement. However, those who knew him understood that

this accomplished academic, with no pastoral experience, would be particularly unsuited to deal with the fallout in the early days of the crisis. They were proved correct.

My final years at UCD were spent as Newman Scholar in Theology. During that period, I organised conferences on the future of the Irish Church and the prospects for religion in a country growing ever more spiritually disenchanted. Still, no one seemed to have a convincing analysis concerning the origins of the crisis or, indeed, how the Church could be rehabilitated. Again, the usual suggestion was that celibacy was the primary cause. To me, that seemed far too superficial an explanation, for the simple reason that celibacy, in itself, did not cause certain priests to become paedophiles. A more reasonable explanation, one given credence by the facts, is that paedophiles used the priesthood to acquire unlimited access to innocent children. This is not to say that silence should surround issues such as celibacy or married priests, but simply that they do not provide sufficient explanation for why, at a certain point, the Irish priesthood became so dysfunctional.

Maynooth is, of course, home to St. Patrick's College, the national seminary. When Pope John Paul visited Ireland in 1979, he went there to give his apostolic blessing to Ireland's future priests. I clearly recall the rapturous reception the Pope received from the hundreds that crammed into the college chapel that day. By the time I arrived in 2006, there were no more than 70 students studying for Holy Orders.

While St. Patrick's College shares a campus with the National University of Ireland, they are, nevertheless, distinct institutions. However, due to historical links with the seminary, and also due to the nature of the subject, seminarians are obliged to take courses offered by the Philosophy Department of NUI. Consequently, I found myself teaching the "remnant" of a deeply wounded Church, young men who had defied the cultural climate to respond to a vocation now so stigmatised. Most were young and culturally up-to-speed. They confounded the conventional stereotype and were prepared to do what they could to rescue Irish Catholicism from its self-inflicted catastrophe.

I came to Maynooth not only as an academic, but as a public commentator. Many of the seminarians followed my weekly column in the *Irish Daily Mail*, and were aware that, unlike most other members of the Irish media, I was not hostile to the Church. Indeed, I had often publicly articulated my belief that, notwithstanding all it had suffered, the Church could be redeemed and reclaimed. But that would require a comprehensive cleansing, something for which the Irish Episcopal authorities seemed to have little appetite. What I did not realise, however, was that the seminarians had a story to tell, one that would add a significant new dimension to the entire saga. It was a tragic tale of dysfunctional formation, deep-rooted clericalism and institutional disorder.

One seminarian put it like this: “If the product is broken, you need to look at the factory”. Looking at the so-called “factory”, I discovered widespread discontent among students with the prevailing clerical culture. I listened to many accounts from seminarians, both past and present, and the story was always the same. Here is a typical account:

I entered Maynooth Seminary with an open mind, conscious that the path to the Priesthood would surely be fraught with great challenges. We were initially greeted by a Director of Formation (a priest), before we commenced the first month in seminary known as a spiritual or introductory month.

The spiritual month began without incident. The talks and group discussions were riddled with pop-psychology, but nothing scandalous occurred until we were launched into a “sexuality workshop” which lasted several days.

This annual workshop, for first year seminarians, had been going on for many years, and was led by some women who displayed an unhealthy curiosity about any sexual activity the participants may have previously engaged in, to the point that we were each pressurised into making pseudo-confessions to the group.

The so-called “spiritual month” set the tone for seminary life and that tone was one of dissent. These group gatherings would begin with a prayer offered to an unspecified “spirit”. We were actively encouraged to replace the Divine Office with our own pseudo-liturgies in the name of “creativity”. The Mass was frequently held in rooms where kneeling was impossible. Where it was possible, it was often forbidden. The words and rubrics of the liturgy were changed in the name of “creativity” and all standard devotions of the Church were discouraged.

There was, however, an underlying presumption or hope amongst the seminarians that the real issues would be dealt with tomorrow. Yet tomorrow came, and the day after that, but nothing of any worth was ever taught.

The problem of alcoholism was another major feature not just among seminarians, but also among the priests. Several times every week, groups of seminarians would return from the bar causing havoc by banging on doors and, at times, gaining entry to other seminarians’ rooms with the use of a master key. Once again, when incidents of this nature were reported to the directors of formation, the conversation would inevitably focus on the reaction of the complainant, and nothing would be done to instil discipline or encourage self-control among the offending seminarians. It

was not unknown for a candidate for the priesthood to become a full-blown alcoholic and to receive treatment for the condition, although, more often than not, it was only after ordination that the effects of his flawed formation became apparent.

Pastoral formation was also deeply problematic. An appalling aspect was the practise of sending seminarians for counselling and for “psychological assessments”. The qualifications of the counsellors and assessors were not known to us, and we often pondered whether they might be the very same people who had given a clean bill of health to the numerous paedophile priests exposed in the media, and who had been moved about only to destroy the lives of more innocent children.

As my time progressed in seminary, I observed the effects that the flawed formation was having on my brother seminarians and on myself. Many became addicted to alcohol. Some left, totally disenchanted with their time in Maynooth. Some simply abandoned the Church, while others decided to compromise their faith in the hope being able to salvage something after ordination. Of these, a few continue to compromise as priests, and have struggled to come to terms with the contradictions inherent in their ministry. Others survived Maynooth, and are keeping the Church alive by rejecting the false teachings taught there.

My own efforts to survive Maynooth failed. I went through the regular channels of reporting what I experienced to senior members of the clergy, before explaining the situation to my Bishop. He told me to turn a blind-eye and to get on with my own formation. Clearly, he was unwilling to take my word against the powers that be at Maynooth.

To put it simply, Ireland’s seminaries were in a state of intellectual, moral and liturgical chaos. They were totally unregulated and unsupervised. Moreover, they were rejecting the very people who could actually do something positive to heal the Irish Church. When I discussed all this with my editors at the *Irish Daily Mail*, they urged me to write a column outlining the problems and proposing some solutions. I could not have anticipated the response I received. A veritable tsunami of correspondence swept across my desk from seminarians and ex-seminarians, priests and lay Catholics, all of whom corroborated the contents of the column. I followed that initial piece with three more articles, the result of which was an independent investigation by the *Irish Daily Mail* into the National Seminary. Its conclusions mirrored my own. When the paper put these claims to the authorities at St Patrick’s, they responded by saying that, while “it is very regrettable that these former students have a negative assessment of their time in the seminary, this must be viewed against the backdrop of the many hundreds of

alumni and current students for whom the seminary experience has proved to be a very positive and personally formative one". The *Irish Mail* countered that while this may indeed be true "for those who buy into Maynooth's [...] approach to the liturgy and to sexuality", it is "bogus and pernicious" for those expecting to receive "traditional training in how to provide pastoral care to their parishioners". Moreover, it is, "as has already been observed in the U.S. – more likely to turn candidates for the priesthood away from their vocations".

The reference to the United States is instructive because one of the first initiatives they undertook to sort out their crisis was to call, in 2002, for an 'apostolic visitation' to all American seminaries and novitiates. As it happens, my articles were read and acknowledged by two high-profile American clerics who would subsequently lead a similar visitation to Ireland in 2011. Cardinals Timothy Dolan of New York and Sean O'Malley of Boston, both of whom were considered *papabile* following the abdication of Benedict XVI, understood the gravity of the problems facing Irish seminaries. Not only did Cardinal Dolan study our reports, but he also invited advance submissions from all former and current Irish seminarians. A widely read columnist, blogger and an exquisite communicator, Dolan is also a man of immense good humour, something he considers vital for revitalising the priesthood. As he says when discussing seminary recruitment: "Happiness attracts". Those are the words of a man who speaks from direct experience. As Archbishop of Milwaukee in 2002, Dolan was confronted with a massive sex abuse crisis involving 58 clergy. He was also a successor to a bishop who, as he says, "resigned in ignominy after revelations that he paid an adult male partner \$450,000 of archdiocesan funds". Still, Dolan handled that affair with great skill and sensitivity, while simultaneously focusing on seminary formation.

Not surprisingly, seminaries once again began to flourish under the Cardinal's direction. I say "not surprisingly" because Timothy Dolan has written what I consider the finest book on priesthood in print. *Priests for the Third Millennium* is a beautifully crafted and inspirational account of the form priestly life ought to assume in the modern age, one which he summarised in a speech to faculty and staff of St Patrick's College, shortly after his appointment as apostolic visitor. The priesthood, he remarked, is "a call, not a career; a redefinition of self, not just a ministry; a way of life, not a job; a state of being, not a function; a permanent lifelong commitment, not a temporary style of service; an identity, not a role". And to those who "wonder if holiness, humility and identity are a pollyannaish ignoring of deep psychological turmoil in the priesthood, I say with Adrian van Kaam, no, as a matter of fact, holiness means wholeness, and wholeness means integrity, and a man of integrity hardly abuses our youth or overlooks the crimes of those who do".

2. Archbishop Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York, "God is the only treasure people desire to find in a

Cardinal Dolan's visitation recommended, among other things, that formation should be "rooted in authentic priestly identity, offering a more systematic preparation for a life of priestly celibacy by maintaining a proper equilibrium between human, spiritual and ecclesial dimensions"; that Episcopal governance of seminaries be reinforced; that more consistent admission criteria for admissibility of candidates be introduced; that greater concern be shown for the training – both intellectual and pastoral – of seminarians, including in-depth formation on matters of child protection, with increased pastoral attention to victims of sexual abuse and their families; and that the pastoral programme be apostolic, priestly and sacramental. Furthermore, in a dramatic move, the entire teaching staff of the Irish College in Rome was dismissed and replaced, thus confirming reports by countless seminarians that it was even more dysfunctional than seminaries at home.

However, to their great credit Cardinals Dolan and O'Malley understood that all of this would be meaningless unless implemented by good bishops. By the time of their arrival, it was widely recognised that the Irish episcopate was floundering. Bishops had lost control of their seminaries, their priests, and had squandered the confidence of their parishioners. That is why the appointment, in 2011, of Oxford-educated Archbishop Charles Brown as Papal Nuncio to Ireland, was a bold and strategic move by the Vatican. When I visited the Archbishop shortly after his arrival, he informed me that he was in Ireland for one reason: "To appoint good bishops". This is crucial, not only because we now know that most Irish bishops were found wanting in their response to the abuse crisis, but because a bishop enjoys almost unlimited power over his diocese. Hence, where there are good bishops, seminaries and churches do not, as a rule, descend into chaos. Put simply, if the Irish Church is to have a future – if it is to be *reclaimed* – renewal of the episcopate must be *the* top priority.

Since Archbishop Brown's appointment, Ireland has a new Primate who replaced the embattled Cardinal Sean Brady. Archbishop Eamon Martin is young, solid and capable – somewhat in the mode of Archbishop Brown. All recently appointed bishops are men with solid intellectual baggage – like Brendan Leahy of Limerick – or with considerable pastoral experience and completely clean hands. when it comes to abuse. Should this trend continue, I have no doubt the Irish Church will slowly recover its moral standing. And while it will never again dominate Irish society in the way it once did, it has the potential to speak with authority on matters of faith and mercy – something strikingly lacking in contemporary Irish society.

priest", lecture to mark the Year for Priests in St Patrick's College, Maynooth, on May 27, 2010. See [<http://www.catholicbishops.ie/2010/05/31/address-of-archbishop-timothy-dolan-at-lecture-to-mark-year-for-priests-in-maynooth/>], accessed February 15, 2015.

After twenty years of terrible trauma, the Irish Church is finally coming to terms with its dark past. That it is doing so by replacing those who let that crisis unfold is good news, not least for those who suffered grievously from their failures. It is also good news for those many men who were driven from the Irish priesthood, simply because they rejected the prevailing idea that it was just a job and not a permanent lifelong commitment. Had they been listened to things might have turned out very differently. That they have been heard, however belatedly, suggests the Irish Church has learned an important lesson, one that may yet mean the difference between survival and extinction.