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## Reflections of a Layman on the Ryan Report

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# Responding to the Ryan Report

Edited by Tony Flannery CSsR

The Ryan Report on abuse of children in institutions of the state which were run by religious orders caused outrage and confusion among all the people of Ireland, both members of the Catholic Church and others.

In the aftermath of the immediate shock and the widespread media coverage, it seems useful to reflect on the roots of the problems that gave rise to these horrors and to try to set out a way forward which might help to avoid such things happening in the future. Tony Flannery set about seeking views, comments and analysis which might add some breadth and depth to that reflection. He has brought together a very competent and thoughtful team to write about the report, in the hope of encouraging a constructive debate on the various issues raised.

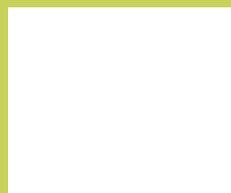
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Responding to the Ryan Report  
Flannery CSsR Editor

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# Responding to the Ryan Report

Edited by  
Tony Flannery

## *Reflections of a Layman on the Ryan Report*

*Eamon Maher*

It was a pleasant surprise to be asked by the editor to contribute a chapter to this book on the Ryan Report. To me it was a sign of how far Ireland has travelled in recent years that a layman be approached by a priest to share his views about a report that is damning of the treatment meted out to children in religious-run institutions to which they were committed, often for the simple reason that they were from poor families or born out of wedlock. My opinions will be as measured as possible, in spite of my belief that it is not wise to deal in too dispassionate a manner with the physical violence and sexual and psychological trauma that were visited on vulnerable children a few mere decades ago in these establishments.

Writing in *The Irish Times* on the 23 May 2009, Fintan O'Toole drew an analogy between how people reacted to the incarceration of 170,000 children in our 50 or so industrial schools to Hubert Butler's account of Drancy, the camp in Paris where, during World War II, children were held before being transported to Auschwitz. Butler wrote: 'Had four or five children only been killed or burned ... we would have responded emotionally and their fate would have been carved on a marble tablet.' Relating this to the Irish experience, O'Toole observed: 'Had seven or 17 or even 70 children been enslaved by church and state, we could weep for their fate. But 170,000 is too many and the things inflicted on them too vile.'<sup>1</sup> I had not actually realised that so many had passed through these institutions: it is indeed a lot of human suffering to come to terms with.

It is important to recall in the survivors' own words exactly what did happen to them. Here is a selection of comments taken from the *Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* and quoted in Irish newspapers on May 21, 2009:

## RESPONDING TO THE RYAN REPORT

The worst thing was seeing a young boy die. He was 12 years old ... he was beaten by brothers on the landing and he fell over a banister.

I was beaten and hospitalised by the head brother and not allowed to go to my father's funeral in case my bruises were seen.

I was beaten until knocked out and my head split. My finger was placed in boiling water until all feeling was lost.

I was stripped naked by a nun and beaten with a stick and given no supper and humiliated.

I never gave my daughters or my sons a hug. I associate touch with sex, I could not put my arms around them. I am always wary if I bump into someone. I am always saying 'sorry, sorry, sorry' ... I feel so dirty, afraid ...

At six I was raped by a nun and at 10 I was hit with a poker on the head by a nun.

I was tied to a cross and raped whilst others masturbated at the side.

I wouldn't stop crying. I was down in the ground. The first thing he could lay his hand on was a hammer and he hit me and damaged me.

One brother kept watch while the other abused me [sexually] ... then they changed over. Every time it ended with a severe beating. When I told the priest about it in Confession, he called me a liar. I never spoke about it again.

I was beaten stark naked for wetting the bed, two or three different people would beat me. They liked beating kids naked.

The horrors that took place behind the walls of these hellish institutions were kept silent for far too long and often for reasons similar to those that prompted clerical authorities to keep hidden the clerical abuse scandals: the pathological fear of compens-

ation claims pouring in. Attempts have been made by certain commentators, many of them sympathetic to the religious orders, to explain away the abuse within the industrial schools and reformatories by saying that these things occurred in a very different Ireland to the one that exists today, at a time when the attitude to corporal punishment was ambivalent, especially when it came to those who were viewed as being low-lives, the spawn of criminals and whores. Also, the argument that the majority of sexual abuse occurs in the home is a sinister way of detracting from the degree to which men and women of the cloth, who were revered in Ireland as the upholders of the gospel message of love, indulged in horrible practices with minors. That they should be guilty of heinous crimes against innocent and defenceless children goes completely against what their vocation was supposed to consist of, and hence the level of opprobrium the revelations inspired in people towards the perpetrators.

There is a feeling of guilt also. Essentially, we in Ireland allowed prison camps to be created for children, places where male and female religious acted outside of the rule of law. In fact, they were allowed establish and enact the laws according to which these corrective schools were run, with little or no interference from the state. In addition, there was undoubtedly collusion on the part of the agencies of the state, most notably the Judiciary, the social services and the Department of Education. Very few dared to speak out against how the schools were run. The Catholic Church in Ireland at the time enjoyed too much power and prestige to be challenged in any meaningful way. Those who tried to break the silence, like the Artane chaplain, Fr Henry Moore, were either not taken seriously or else were excoriated. Thus the violence continued unchecked, the isolation and suffering of the inmates exacerbated by the knowledge that their cries for help would not be heard. It was a question of 'offering it up', surviving as best one could in the midst of systemic abuse and violence. At this juncture, I cannot help thinking of the former Director of One in Four, Colm O'Gorman, and

his experiences at the hands of Fr Sean Fortune. In his compelling memoir, *Beyond Belief*, he wrote:

In order to escape I would have to name the abuse and that couldn't happen because to do so would destroy the very fabric of the society I lived in. It's no exaggeration to say that it would mean the end of the world ... or at least the end of the world as the Ireland of the early 1980s knew it.<sup>2</sup>

O'Gorman discovered at an early stage that to 'name' the abuse he was suffering at the hands of a sinister and manipulative priest would bring shame and disgrace on his family and himself. The fact that from the age of 14 a Catholic priest was using his body for sexual gratification, that he was being raped, forced to perform oral sex, degraded in the worst possible ways, all this had to be hidden from public view because no one would believe him, because society was complicit in keeping the lid on such sordidness. As was so often the case of the victims in the Industrial Schools, the victim was treated as if he/she was responsible for what had happened: 'This sex is worse than bad, it is evil. But he is a priest and cannot be evil, so I must be evil.'<sup>3</sup> Then there was the difficulty in finding the words to describe what had happened:

Words like abuse are easy to use. Words can't show how it was. Words can't describe the smell, the sounds, the taste of it all. Words can't tell how it felt.

It was sordid and degrading and hateful. Hateful is an important word here ... it was full of hate. Full of hatred of himself and of what I was to him. I believe he hated the boy, the boy he had been and the boy I was before him now. He destroyed that boy. He seduced and sickened him. He defiled and destroyed him until he was no more.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the testimonies in the Ryan Report record similar hate on the part of the male and female religious. On several occasions, the sexual abuse was followed by a savage beating, with the children being told they had the devil in them, that they

were the source of temptation and evil. Unlike so many victims, Colm O’Gorman grew to appreciate that he was not to blame for what had happened to him and, more importantly, he had the intelligence and the facility with words to communicate his message in a forceful and unambiguous manner. The inmates of Letterfrack, Goldenbridge and Artane, to name three of the more notorious institutions, did not in general possess these skills. Their spirit was broken along with their bodies. They felt worthless, a shameful blot on society.

Much of the awfulness that is chronicled in the Ryan Report had its origin in an ambivalent and unhealthy attitude towards sex. Tom Inglis points out how it was almost impossible to mention sex in the Ireland of three or four decades ago. Sex was associated with sin, impurity, lack of control. As such, it was viewed as being dangerous. Sadism and sexual perversion, as they became manifest in the reformatories and industrial schools, were the result of a repressed sexuality among a large number of the male and female religious who were in charge of these places. They were the pawns of a power structure that brokered no challenge to its authority. Inglis writes:

They were caught in a regime of Catholic thought and practice from which, effectively, there was little escape. There was no mechanism by which they could talk about themselves, their desires and frustrations. They took their anger out on the children. The children became their scapegoats.<sup>5</sup>

Patsy McGarry develops this point further by showing how the clergy preached the virtues of the celibate life, which was viewed as superior to the married state. He continues: ‘[...] sexual activity outside marriage was evil, and even within where the intention was not procreation. Sexual pleasure was taboo, powerful evidence of an inferior animal nature that constantly threatened what was divine in the human.’<sup>6</sup> The sermons given in most Irish churches concentrated on issues associated with sex, rather than on the readings from scripture, and in a way that always promulgated an unhealthy distrust of the flesh. Sex thus assumed the

characteristics of a national obsession. Tony Flannery is very forthright on this issue: 'The Catholic attitudes to sex that my generation grew up with were oppressive and guilt-ridden. The ridiculous idea of associating all sexual thoughts and desires with mortal sin was seriously damaging to the person.' Indeed it was! But, even more damagingly: 'It led to a great deal of sexual repression, and when sexual attitudes and desires are repressed at an early age, they tend to emerge in gravely unhealthy and perverted ways.'<sup>7</sup> Those working in the industrial schools and reformatories were the products of this skewed view of sexuality. In many cases, the religious cloth served as a convenient means of having untrammelled access to vulnerable children. Absolute authority, allied to a problematic sexuality and complete control over those in their care, formed a toxic cocktail, the results of which have emerged in recent weeks and months. This type of attitude needs to be placed in a broader context, which is what I hope to do now in an effort to explain how the male and female religious working in these institutions carried with them certain values and traits that proved so dangerous to children.

A good place to start might be the work of one of Ireland's most loved and respected writers, the late John McGahern. McGahern was acutely aware that the Irish approach to sexuality was inherently unhealthy. He wrote in *Memoir*:

Authority's writ ran from God the Father down and could not be questioned. Violence reigned as often as not in the homes as well. One of the compounds at its base was sexual sickness and frustration, as sex was seen, officially, as unclean and sinful, allowable only when it too was licensed. Doctrine separated body and soul.<sup>8</sup>

With the artist's sensitivity, McGahern was able to link the violence to sexual frustration. A classic example of this can be seen in the opening lines of his second novel, *The Dark*, which was banned on its publication in 1965 and caused the writer to lose his job as a primary school teacher in Clontarf. The young protagonist, Mahoney, is heard to utter a curse under his breath

and is forced to strip and bend over a chair while his father brings the leather down on the chair in a simulated beating that causes the son to urinate on the floor in terror. The older man is sexually aroused by this feeling of power: 'He didn't lift a hand, as if the stripping compelled by his will alone gave him pleasure'.<sup>9</sup> The abuse of power is one of the main causes for the events that are related in the Ryan Report. Elaine Byrne, in an article on this topic, quoted a passage from the Book of Proverbs that reads: 'When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn.' According to Byrne, the Catholic Church in Ireland felt it 'was above reproach, without question and beyond criticism'. She quoted a Sr Carmella, a Mercy nun who was principal at St Joseph's Industrial School in Cliften who followed the instructions of the Reverend Mother because 'she was that kind of person that her word was law, she was an authority and that was it'.<sup>10</sup> Many of the religious working in the institutions came from relatively humble backgrounds and the power they assumed in the schools was a heady drug which a good number found impossible to resist. In McGahern's fiction, the father exerts power only in the home and the victims are as often as not the children. The beatings are not as traumatic as the sexual abuse:

The worst was to have to sleep with him the nights he wanted love, strain of waiting for him to come to bed, no hope of sleep in the waiting – counting and losing the count of the thirty-two boards across the ceiling, trying to pick out the darker circles of the knots beneath the varnish.<sup>11</sup>

A lighted match that is pushed at the child's eyelids, the prelude to a conversation that will end up with the massaging of the thighs and later the groin, leads to what Mahoney refers to as 'the dirty rags of intimacy'. The father says: 'You like that – it's good for you – it relaxes you – it lets you sleep. Would you like me to rub you here? It'll ease wind. You like that? It'll let you sleep.'<sup>12</sup> Approaching such a taboo subject in 1960s Ireland was very daring and McGahern paid a heavy price when he lost his

job as a result of the banning. I sometimes wonder how he could have expected any other outcome given that the church at the time was completely in control of the Catholic schools in the country. The then Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, campaigned strenuously for McGahern to be removed from his teaching position after the banning. Whatever about alluding to child abuse in the home, dealing with the prospect of clerical child abuse, as McGahern did in *The Dark*, was totally unacceptable. Mahoney made a promise to his mother, now deceased, that he would become a priest and one day say Mass for her. He travels to see his cousin, Fr Gerald, with a view to discussing his vocation. At the start of the stay, the pair pay a visit to the Ryans' house where his sister Joan has found a position helping in the shop that is owned by this family. Mahoney is disturbed when told by Joan that 'It's worse than home' and he later discovers that Mr Ryan has been making lewd observations to her as well as putting his hand up her dress. Her brother resolves to take her home with him in a moment of rare decisiveness.

Fr Gerald has a boy of around Mahoney's age keeping house for him, something that seems unusual, even untoward. Why would a boy be employed to do this type of work? Mahoney is then perplexed when his cousin joins him in his room late at night and proceeds to question him in an intrusive manner about his sexual fantasies and problems with masturbation. Mahoney feels he is not worthy of the priesthood because of his impurity and the presence of the semi-naked priest in the bed alongside him strikes him as being uncomfortably similar to the abuse he endures at his father's hands. After admitting his weakness to Fr Gerald, he asks the priest if he ever had to fight that particular sin himself when he was younger. The question is met with a silence that the adolescent finds shameful: he has revealed all and gets nothing in return. At a certain point, the shame turns to anger:

What right had he (Fr Gerald) to come and lie with you in bed, his body hot against yours, his arm around your shoul-

ders. Almost as the cursed nights when you father used stroke your thighs.<sup>13</sup>

While nothing happens on this occasion, the boy spots enough resemblances between the behaviour of his father and the priest to be aware of the potential for a repeat of the abuse. He abandons all thoughts of the priesthood at this point and leaves the priest's house sooner than expected, accompanied by his sister whom he saves from the lascivious Mr Ryan, a pillar of the local church. What is most striking about McGahern's novel is his courageous decision to tackle a subject like abuse at this time and in this manner. From *Memoir* we know that the writer's father also interfered with him. Note how similar the description is to what occurred in the Mahoney household:

He never interfered with me in an obviously sexual way, but he frequently massaged my belly and thighs. As in all other things connected with the family, he asserted that he was doing this for my own good: it relaxed taut muscles, eased wind and helped bring on sleep ... Looking back, and remembering his tone of voice and the rhythmic movement of his hand, I suspect he was masturbating. During the beatings, there was sometimes the same sexual undertow, but louder, coarser.<sup>14</sup>

You may feel as though we have drifted a long way from the Ryan Report, but it is my contention that McGahern did much to alert the public about certain dark aspects of Irish society as early as the 1960s, when such topics were never openly discussed. A puritanical church inspired an irrational hatred of the body in Irish people at the time. This resulted in the crimes of their parents being visited on the children. Hence illegitimacy was dealt with in a forceful manner, with the children usually being taken from their mothers shortly after birth. Poverty was another 'sin' in the eyes of Irish society, possibly as a result of the economic problems that followed our newly-won independence from Britain and the long shadow cast by the Famine. For whatever reason, the poor did not enjoy anything like equal rights to the professional classes and those with money. When

they arrived in the corrective institutions, they were viewed as subhuman, lesser beings, an outlook that made it possible to treat them like animals. Writing shortly after the three-part documentary entitled *States of Fear* (1999) exposed the horrors of what went on in these institutions, the journalist Mary Kenny wrote:

The scale of the cruelty seemed so systematic that it was as though it was inherent in our history: not only were the religious who ran these institutions accused before the bar of history, so was the Irish state, which utterly failed to take responsibility for those in its care. So, indeed, were the complacent middle classes, who used these reformatories as a source for servants, and so too was the media, which remained indifferent to the punitive regimes around them.<sup>15</sup>

The fault certainly did not lie entirely with the religious orders, which may be what prompted the then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, to issue a formal government apology on behalf of the government and its citizens to the victims of this system in May 1999. The reaction of the religious orders to the revelations mirrors closely the approach of the bishops when it came to clerical child abuse: they circled the wagons, proclaimed ignorance of what was going on, denied that things were as bad as the media were making them out to be. (There was collective amnesia also about the decision to take out insurance against potential compensation claims some time before the full extent of the abuse was revealed). Mary Raftery sums it up well when she writes:

When protecting their own (usually financial) interests, the religious orders displayed a zeal and even ferocity notably absent in their attempts down the years to control the criminal battery, assault and rape perpetrated by their member brothers, priests and nuns against small children.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, the Irish bishops, shocked by the extent of the claims that poured in during the clerical abuse scandals, tried to protect their own interests by forcing victims to bring their cases

to court or feigning disbelief that there could be any substance to allegations against priests who were known to have a track record of paedophilia. With the publication of *The Ferns Report* in 2005, there could be no more denying that certain bishops sent priests who were known abusers from parish to parish, where they repeatedly inflicted pain on innocent and powerless victims. As their power began to slip, the desire remained to hold on to its vestiges by whatever means possible. When the public reacted angrily to the improper and reprehensible acts that had been perpetrated by some priests, the hierarchy behaved like rabbits caught in the car headlights. They attempted to minimise at all costs the potential damage to the institution to which they had pledged their lives. Tom Inglis wrote on the publication of *The Ferns Report*:

There was a time when people trusted the church. It supposedly told us the truth about life and death. While other organisations had material interests, the church was only interested in proclaiming the truth. Now we see that it has an almost pathological inability to tell the truth about itself.<sup>17</sup>

Fair analyst that he is, however, Inglis also stipulated that the Catholic Church in Ireland merely showed itself to possess the same weaknesses as those displayed by any group that enjoys a monopoly of power. Recently, politicians, the Garda Síochána, lawyers, bankers, journalists, teachers, developers were also seen to have corrupt and evil members in their ranks. That said, the trust placed in priests has a special significance, as they are supposed to act in a Christ-like manner. What was particularly annoying to Irish people was the way in which the hierarchy attempted to avoid facing up to their inept mismanagement of the crisis. After *The Ferns Report*, certain measures were put in place by the church to ensure that children's safety would be paramount in the future. However, in recent times, the Bishop of Cloyne, John Magee, was found by the National Board for Safeguarding Children to have mishandled cases of alleged sexual abuse by priests in his diocese. It was another clear case of a

bishop acting as sole arbiter in allegations of abuse being brought against priests. Cardinal Seán Brady's initial reaction seemed to indicate dissatisfaction when he stated that the first concern in these matters must be the protection of innocent children. But as the weeks went by and Bishop Magee refused to resign, the mood changed perceptibly. On the 13 January 2009 Cardinal Brady rejected calls for Magee's resignation, declaring that he had known this man for over 50 years and found him to be a 'reliable and dependable person'. (In his handling the allegations of abuse, he had shown himself to be anything other than 'reliable' and 'dependable'.)

On 6 March 2009, John Magee finally agreed to step aside to make room for the Archbishop of Cashel and Emyl, Dermot Clifford's appointment as apostolic administrator of the Cloyne diocese. The gesture was far too little, far too late. The Cloyne debacle was just one more in a long line of self-inflicted disasters by the Irish hierarchy and once more it came in the highly emotive area of child protection. The Ryan Report has again exposed the Catholic Church to the glare of public scrutiny, a scrutiny that is not at all welcomed by the religious orders that are implicated. It has strong links to the clerical abuse scandals and really cannot be dissociated from them. Archbishop Diarmuid Martin seems to be the one member of the hierarchy with his finger on the pulse of public opinion. He has stated on numerous occasions that the first thing the church has to do in cases like these is to acknowledge its responsibilities and accept the liabilities that come with them. An article he published in *The Irish Times* will not have endeared him to many of his clerical colleagues. Here is a sample of what he had to say:

The first thing the church has to do is to move out of any mode of denial. This was the position for far too long and it is still there. Yes, there was abuse in other quarters. Yes, child-care policy in Ireland at the time (when Industrial Schools and other institutions were operational) was totally inadequate. But the church presented itself as different to others and as better than others and as more moral than others.<sup>18</sup>

Martin echoes in these lines the sentiments of Tom Inglis already quoted. Pointing out inadequacies in other areas does not free the church from supplying moral leadership and providing a more Christian approach than secular bodies to areas like child protection. It is supposed to promote virtues such as love of others, generosity, Christian sacrifice, humility. At times it appears very far removed from such ideals. However The Ryan Report is another stage in the dismantling of what was an all-powerful Irish institution, the Catholic Church. Rather than seeing this necessarily as a bad thing, there is a sense in which this fall from grace could be the beginning of a purification and the emergence of a leaner, humbler, listening church that would be closer to the model favoured by its founder. The French priest-writer Jean Sullivan (1913-1980), wrote in his spiritual journal, *Morning Light*: 'Like the storm clouds of the exodus, the church's face is more luminous today than when it seemed to rule. It has found glory in its humiliation.'<sup>19</sup>

This is exactly what the Irish Church is going to have to do; find 'glory in its humiliation', admit its past failings and set about rebuilding trust and confidence and renewing its commitment to the example of Jesus Christ. Perhaps when it does this, the victims whose horrors are chronicled in the Ryan Report will find some solace. One of these victims, Christine Buckley, stated: 'To promote healing, it is important to learn why abuses occurred and who was responsible.' It is also necessary that there be no repeat of the culture of denial and desire for self-protection that have been the hallmark of the representatives of the Catholic Church when confronted with the sins of their past. Only time will tell whether or not it is up to this particular task.

*Notes:*

1. Fintan O'Toole, 'Law of anarchy, cruelty of care', in *The Irish Times*, 23 May 2009, Weekend Review, p 1.
2. Colm O'Gorman, *Beyond Belief* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2009), p 61.
3. *Beyond Belief*, p 50.
4. *Beyond Belief*, pp 48-9.

## RESPONDING TO THE RYAN REPORT

5. Tom Inglis, 'How we became an international disgrace', in *The Irish Times*, 30 May 2009.
6. Patsy McGarry, 'Roots of a warped view of sexuality', in *The Irish Times*, 20 June 2009.
7. Tony Flannery, 'Attitudes to sexuality and power made for disastrous cocktail', in *The Irish Times*, (Rite and Reason), 26 May 2009.
8. John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber&Faber, 2005), p 18.
9. John McGahern, *The Dark* (Loondon: Faber&Faber, 1965), p 8.
10. Elaine Byrne, 'Irish society shot through with debased authority', in *The Irish Times*, 26 May 2009.
11. *The Dark*, p 17.
12. *The Dark*, p 20.
13. *The Dark*, p 74.
14. *Memoir*, p 188.
15. Mary Kenny, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland* (Dublin: New Island Books, revised and updated edition, 2000), p 309.
16. Mary Raftery, 'Taxpayers pick up the bill while abusers get secrecy and protection', in *The Irish Times*, 22 May 2009.
17. Tom Inglis, 'Something rotten in the barrel itself', in *The Irish Times*, 3 November 2005.
18. Diarmuid Martin, 'Tarnished Orders have a last chance of redemption', in *The Irish Times*, 25 May 2009.
19. Jean Sullivan, *Morning Light: The Spiritual Journal of Jean Sullivan*, trs Joseph Cunneen and Patrick Gormally (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p 149.