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Dublin Clergy and the Murphy Report

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Revisiting the
Murphy Report

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¹⁵ A particularly egregious and damaging instance of this can be found in the Murphy Report, 1.24. See Sweeney, *Commissions of Investigation*, p.53.

¹⁶ The Murphy Commission is not open for questions on its procedures or its report

Dublin Clergy and the Murphy Report

Alan Hilliard

Introduction

This article draws on data from a recent survey of Dublin clergy, aimed at getting some insight into their life and ministry at the time of the publication of the Murphy Report,¹ signed off by its authors Judge Yvonne Murphy (chairperson) and her two commission colleagues in July 2009, and finally published in almost its entirety in November of that year. (Two chapters were temporarily withheld for legal reasons and released later).

The article contains some of the initial findings of the survey, which was entitled 'A Window on Murphy: the Perspective of Clergy of the Archdiocese of Dublin'. The Murphy Report was a significant event in the history of the archdiocese. For the first time, a government investigation was carried out into its functioning and an official report was published and made available (in hard copy from Government Publications and also on the internet). The report highlighted instances of abuse within the archdiocese and the way in which these were dealt with by the archdiocese itself and other agencies.

Overview

The present article gives an overview of the survey's methodology, followed by presentation of the data under two headings: a picture of the 'mind-set' or outlook of clergy vis-à-vis their life as diocesan priests and an examination of the predominant supports they could rely on at the time of the Murphy Report's publication. The purpose of the survey was not to make recommendations but to capture something of the experience of the clergy of Dublin at the time. I am myself a priest of the archdiocese. I have a history of involvement with migrant groups – non-Irish immigrants in this country, Irish emigrants abroad. In my work, I have studied the experiences of often marginalised groups with a view to helping them in their journey away from isolation towards integration. Study of their experiences informed strategies which were subsequently used to advocate for policy change in this area.

For the sake of clarity, two points should be noted. Firstly, the term 'clergy' refers to clergy who responded to the survey. Secondly, my objective at this stage is to honour those who did respond. I hope there is no need to emphasise that nothing in the present article should be allowed to detract from the horror of the terrible acts of abuse detailed in the Murphy Report. I propose, in further articles, to detail how clergy perceived the benefit the report brought for victims and their families. At this juncture it can be said that the data shows that almost 100% of those who replied to the survey thought the report had been both helpful and necessary for victims. It told the victims' story and it allowed them and their families a freedom to talk about much that had been previously hidden. At another level clergy say that it increased their understanding of the horror of abuse, making their ministry more sensitive to those who had been affected.

Survey cohort and methodology

The target group for the survey was priests who were ministering in the archdiocese of Dublin at the time the report was published, in November 2009. Identifying this group was a difficult task. The source was the archdiocese of Dublin website (<http://dublindiocese.ie/guidebook/priests>) in the week commencing Sunday 4 August 2013. The number of priests listed that week as resident in the archdiocese was 589. This selection method ensured that the cohort was representative and did not in any way seek by intent or by error to exclude any particular view, opinion or category of clergy.

The survey was distributed by post during the first week of September 2013, three years and ten months after the Murphy Report appeared. Two options were offered to those wishing to complete it – on-line or through the post. To access the online option, priests were directed to a website link and, within twenty-four hours, they received, by email, a further link to the main survey document. This allowed them to complete the document and gave them the option of revisiting and editing their contribution, if they so wished. Both the on-line and hard copy versions allowed the option of completing the survey under an alias, chosen by the participant himself. 49.4% of the questionnaires were completed on-line, the remaining 50.6% via hard copy, which was subsequently posted to the coordinator in a pre-addressed envelope.

The survey was posted to 575 clergy listed on the diocesan website.

Fourteen of the priests listed had no postal address. According to the office of the moderator of the archdiocese, as of 31 October 2013, there are 477 priests² with diocesan appointments. Ninety-seven responses were received to the invitation to participate. Based on the total numbers provided by the archdiocese, this gives a survey response rate of 20.33%. Such a rate means that the survey does not claim to be representative of the clergy of the entire archdiocese. Some will see the response-rate as sufficient to provide a good sampling; for many others, it can only lay claim to be a survey of those who responded.

The present article seeks to investigate two questions: what information does the survey provide to help us to a better understanding of the mind-set of clergy in the archdiocese of Dublin? And what does the data tell us about the supports that clergy availed of at the time of the Murphy Report's publication?

Section One: The mind-set of Dublin clergy

The data under this heading can be divided into three categories of response.

Lacking in Energy. 15.46% of respondents mention that they are lacking in energy or bordering on depression. Terms that they use to describe themselves are 'weary', 'switched-off', or 'hung out to dry'. One qualification has to be used when interpreting this data: some clergy who replied refer to their own situation, while others refer to their perception of clergy in general. However, from replies in this category, we find references to the winter of 2009, when the report was published, as a time when, as one priest put it, 'I live with a dark cloud over me...there is a sadness in me but also a hope for the future'. Another elderly priest, after a life of service in the diocese, says: 'I can't wait to retire...just let me say Mass and preach Jesus'. One other priest in this category, who would be classed as middle-aged, generalises from his own perspective: 'Priests in the diocese have "switched-off"...we may not be able to save what is left'. Referring to the same period, a younger priest, ordained between 1995-99, says that 'it was the lowest point in the morale of clergy – and I believe that this has yet to be overcome'. One recently ordained priest noted that the report had the effect of 'de-energising an already tired/demoralised group'.

'You are on your own'. A second group of responses can be categorised by the phrase 'you are on your own'. The feeling of being on their own is recorded by 11.34% of respondents. The week of the publication of the report may have offered the opportunity to express many feelings that were latent for some time. We often say a crisis brings out the best and the worst in people. This is also true of organisations. A whole other paper could be written on 'the Sunday after the Murphy Report'. For the moment, however, and for the purposes of this paper, it can be said that that Sunday heightened the sense for some of 'being out on your own'.

Feeling very raw, one priest, ordained in the eighties, spoke of being 'left with nothing to face the people with'. Facing the congregation on that weekend, one priest from the same ordination era simply said, 'Priests are left to self-support'. Another older priest said that despite the fact that those in authority did their best, this era plunged him into a realisation that it was now a case of 'every man for himself'. There are other angles to the sense of being 'out on your own' which come across in the data. One reply noted that the training for and the culture of priesthood in the archdiocese of Dublin rendered people 'individualistic'. The person in question has since left active ministry.

'You are on your own, but I have done something about it'. The third, substantially larger category can be understood as saying: 'we are on our own but I have done something about it'. This category is more difficult to quantify as it manifests itself across the data in a variety of ways. The point will be amplified in the next section, when consideration is given to supports that priests availed of at the time. The mind-set now under consideration is exemplified by the statement of a priest in his early seventies: 'My ministry and my inner life are what I make of them. This is liberation'.

In this category, there is an emerging acceptance that the work of clergy is not without its difficulties and demands and the context of the work is ever-changing and at times uncertain. Realising the state of play, one priest relates: 'I had to realise that I am on my own as a priest in Dublin. So, I really stopped looking for any meaningful support. I have no sense that we are engaged in a communal mission, not in any fraternal sense of the word'. Another, referring directly to publication of the report, said: 'Support was not needed, I feel'. 'As adults', he

continued, 'we had to face the facts with both sadness and honesty. We did not need more "paternalistic" or "infantilising" support!' This priest's statement was not dismissive of the need for support or the need for initiatives to support clergy. At a later stage he noted that there is very little fraternity, because 'guys are just trying to keep their heads above water'. And further on he said that 'nothing is being done to empower the presbyterate'.

The data shows that when priests come to the realisation of the harshness of the challenges facing their ministry, some flounder but for others there is a tendency to put personal and professional support structures in place. Among these supports there is mention of fraternities, pastoral reflection groups (mostly set up by the diocese), spiritual direction, directed retreats, therapy, prayer groups and other faith-based communities.

Section Two: The supports for clergy

Support One: Ecclesial Movements. In the face of growing difficulties, and given the ability to name those difficulties, 9.2% of priests who responded to this survey are actively involved in structures that offer support to their ministry and further serve to enhance their individual well-being. One priest, while recognising that the mood in his class-group is 'more resigned and a little depressed', acknowledges the benefits of annual eight-day retreats. He further acknowledges the support received on a Rehab programme following heart surgery and, on another occasion, he benefited greatly from sessions of psychotherapy.

Another priest, who is quite descriptive about what he sees as the shortcomings within the hierarchical model of church, states that the church in Dublin 'is more concerned with bureaucracy and politics than service', yet he admits that this has propelled him into 'making a more determined effort to deepen my spiritual and personal life'. This priest is also a member of what he describes as 'a group support initiative', set up by the diocese. An example of this trend of individuals seeking support in ministry is noted by one priest who is a long-standing member of Focolare:³ 'The small number of priests closely involved with [Focolare], including myself, have noticed a greater urgency on the part of at least some clergy, either to develop relationships of fraternity ... before they were inclined to go it alone, or to deepen those relationships if they'd

been somewhat involved'. Referring to a pilot scheme for supervision in ministry, another priest recognises that 'I think it helped me to be more reflective and more constructive in making my way in ministry'.

Support Two: The parish. The parish and its people are referred to by many, but specifically mentioned by 24.7% of respondents as an important support at the time of the Murphy Report's publication. Reading the data one senses a synergy that cannot be captured adequately in words. The outpouring of support provided the local priest with much needed encouragement. The priest is one who ministers to people in a specific setting; at the time of the report it was as if the tables were turned and the people ministered to the priest. Though many people were angry and expressed that anger to the priest as they left Mass on that Sunday, many others offered words of encouragement and support. There were only two instances in a parochial setting where priests met with difficulty. One priest recalls that, on the Sunday in question, 'a woman, – not a local – came up the aisle giving out'. One other priest noted that, when he preached about the report on that Sunday, 'I had little or no experience of being dealt with unfairly, apart perhaps from by one individual'.

A few statements collected from the data summarise the synergy I refer to. One priest describes how a meeting was organised to support parishioners and the wider public: 'We held the meetings to help parishioners but found that people came to support the priests'. Another priest ordained in the 1960-64 era recounts the reactions of 'whispered support' as he stood at the door after Mass: "'We'll get over this, Father'", "'A tough morning, Father'", "'Christ is bigger than this, Father – hang in there'". 'It was', he said, 'the people spread over two parishes that gave me support – but still [these were] the worst days of my priesthood'.

A younger priest, ordained between 1995-99, tells how 'the response of so many ordinary people was hugely supportive to me and, if I did not have that, I do not know how I would have been able to keep going in ministry as a priest'. The data shows that for many clergy there was an underlying sense of vulnerability and neediness. It was largely unspoken, not fully articulated, but one instance captures it. As one priest stood at the door of the church that Sunday, a person leaving Mass said to him, 'Your credentials in this matter were never in doubt'. The priest reflected

revealingly that 'the fact I remember this so clearly speaks to me of its importance to me at the time'.

Priests, while appreciative of the support from parishioners, were very aware of the impact of the Murphy Report on their lives and ministry. There was a sense that their world, and the context for their priesthood, was changing. 'The ground which I stood on when I was ordained in 1975 has been taken from under me', one priest wrote. But he continued: 'Perhaps it is a good thing'. An older priest describes this in a slightly different way: 'We are all in a new age and altered relationships'. More specifically, one priest noted the strong sense among those he served that 'the church would never again really have a hold on their lives. They were not again going to look to the church for guidance, instruction or advice'.

There is strong evidence that Parish Pastoral Councils proved very helpful and supportive to clergy. The exact nature of this support will be documented at a later date

Support Three: Other clergy. The third source of support, according to the data, came from the deanery⁴ and other priests at a local level. To clarify what this meant, the following question was asked: 'When priests say they found meeting with fellow priests helpful, what format did this take and did they consider it effective in terms of support?' Firstly, strong distinctions emerged between meeting clergy before, during or after publication of the report, with many saying that they found the 'Citywest' meetings⁵ very helpful in the lead up to publication.

Secondly, some were of the view that the archdiocese did what it could - but, in truth, how could anyone prepare for what was to unfold? Thirdly, many priests felt that meetings of priests after the report were adversely affected by other factors, such as the debate about whether auxiliary bishops should resign or not. This question caused division at a time when the opposite was needed. Fourthly, there was strong feeling, by 16.4% of those who responded, that there was very little support in place for priests. Many felt that priesthood in the diocese was 'leaderless and rudderless', with one speaking of his expectation that 'there would be a meeting with priests to discuss the Murphy Report...which didn't happen...I felt this failed priests'. One other priest felt that the lack of support wasn't due to unwillingness but, rather, because those with responsibility were 'not really sure how to support clergy'.

Fifthly, those members of religious orders who replied to the survey reported that, for the most part, they received support from their communities and superiors. Sixthly, some priests seemed to pick up on the message that, if the archdiocese were to offer support for priests, that would be in conflict with its obligations to victims of abuse. Finally, mention of prayer and liturgy in some of the responses suggest that their role deserves attention in a later study.

27.8% of respondents said they found meeting with other clergy during and after publication helpful. From the data, it emerges that deaneries were encouraged to meet the night the report was published. When this happened, the outcomes were mixed. One vicar-forane (the person who offers leadership in the deanery) said: 'In hindsight, I am not sure how helpful it was or if it was just a case of circling the wagons'. As time went on, however, it was the informal meetings organised by fellow-clergy and small gatherings that proved more supportive. As one priest in the 50-54 age category said: 'Priests, I feel, found more support when meeting together spontaneously themselves to talk about the Murphy Report, rather than in any initiative coming from the diocese'. The data, where words such as 'open', 'informal', 'over lunch', 'neighbouring', occur, contains evidence of priests finding support in this way. One of the younger respondents volunteered that he got most support from talking to other priests. However, there are exceptions to this, when the degree of necessary informality was integrated into the deanery structure. As one priest wrote, 'Priests in the deanery did gather together around the time to talk and share their views and how they were feeling. I think it was helpful for most. Some priests were visibly upset, others were stronger but the combination was good overall'.

Support Four: Friends and family. The fourth notable source of support mentioned is that offered by friends and family. 14.7% of respondents indicated that friends and family were available to offer support around the time the report was published. Some said they got no support from fellow-clergy and relied solely on family and friends and some said they received support from friends, with little support from family. One notable trend in the responses is that priests in the sixty-plus category are specific in their reference to priests and friends, whereas those under-sixty identify friends and then note that some of these may be priests.

Conclusion

As already stated, no recommendations or overall conclusions will be drawn here on the basis of the foregoing findings. It is for those who read and reflect on the data to draw their own conclusions. It is my sincere wish that those who contributed to the survey will hear their voices and a reflection of their thoughts in the data as presented. I also hope that clergy who did not take part in the survey may find the data useful as they reflect on priesthood in these times. Finally, I hope that the data may in some way honour those who supported their clergy in Dublin at this difficult time in their lives and ministry. I end by stating again that there is no wish, in anything that has been said, to deflect from the pain and suffering of victims and their families over the years or to excuse any professional mishandling of cases that has occurred.

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Notes

- ¹ *Commission of Investigation: Report into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin* (the 'Murphy Report') (Dublin: Stationery Office, 2009).
- ² The breakdown is: 267 diocesan priests; 169 religious priests i.e. belonging to a religious order or congregation; 36 foreign national priests; and 5 described as 'others'.
- ³ The Focolare Movement had its origins during the Second World War in the Italian city of Trent, where it was founded by the late Chiara Lubich. The organisation now has a world-wide outreach and membership. The movement is inspired by the prayer of Jesus: 'That all may be one' (John 17,21). For further details see <http://www.focolare.ie/>
- ⁴ A deanery is a geographical area within a diocese. In Dublin the priests of the deaneries meet four times a year. Each deanery has a vicar who meets with the archbishop prior to the deanery meeting.
- ⁵ The 'Citywest' meetings were organised by the archdiocese and designed to offer clergy ongoing support and education.