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Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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Irish Catholicism at the Beginning of the Third Millennium

EAMON MAHER

THERE HAVE BEEN changes of seismic proportions in Ireland during the past few decades. In addition to the unprecedented economic growth which has led to almost full employment – something that was unthinkable during the 1980s – there is a swagger and a confidence about Irish people at the beginning of the third millennium.

But all this hasn't come without a cost. Mammon has replaced God in the hearts of many people. Because 2004 was the centenary of the birth of Patrick Kavanagh, several references were made to the pronounced 'spiritual' quality of his poetry, the way it shows reverence for the rituals and sacraments of the Catholic faith. Such reverence is far removed from the kind of mockery of values and persons dear to the Catholic tradition, now occurring in parts of the media. Kevin Myers's recent (humorous?) presentation of Teresa of Avila's mystical experiences at least had the positive effect of sufficiently enraging many readers of *The Irish Times* to incite them to write a spate of letters to the editor complaining about his column. (Myers implied that Teresa's 'agony' – that she described as being akin to being pierced by a burning spear – was comparable to sex.) One person asked what the reaction would have been if Myers thus ridiculed a figure held in similarly high esteem by Muslims or Jews. From enjoying blind loyalty and obedience from the majority of Irish people a half a century ago, the Catholic Church in this country is now sufficiently down in the heel for a journalist to feel safe in casting scorn at one of its great saints.

The reasons for the change of attitude are complex and varied. It is never good for any institution to wield too much power – it inevitably

Eamon Maher is head of humanities at the Institute of Technology and lectures at the Priory Institute, both in Tallaght, Co. Dublin. He is author of *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal*.

leads to abuse – and Ireland certainly held priests and bishops in unsustainably high esteem. In an encouraging address given at the Annual General Meeting of the National Conference of Priests of Ireland (September 28, 2004), Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin emphasised that ‘abuse of power is at the heart of the child abuse scandals. Sexual abuse is an abuse of power over another person.’ He tellingly added:

Any discussion today within the Church about dealing with child abuse and child protection has to recognise the sincere anxiety among many that the Church is still involved in a power game, that it might still be concerned primarily about the corporate interest of the Church, of a diocese or of a religious congregation.

These are refreshingly honest words. There is no attempt to hide the hurt and the wrong that were visited on young people while in the care of priests and nuns. What maddened many people in relation to the clerical sexual abuse revelations, myself included, was the impression that hierarchical figures were concerned primarily, not with bringing healing to bear and acknowledging the hurt caused, but with preserving the material interests of the institution. Power and standing are not what Christ was seeking to encourage.

In this regard, the French priest-writer Jean Sullivan, about whom I’ve written in this magazine and elsewhere, got it perfectly right when he wrote: ‘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.’¹

There is much to ponder on in these words. The Catholic Church in France, from the time of the Revolution, has been forced to justify its positions and argue its case cogently. The forces of secularisation (or *laïcisation* as it is known as in French) have pushed it to the margins, from where it nevertheless continues to bear witness to Christ. The French Church has endured a major dip in vocations to the priesthood and religious life, a drop-off in attendance at Mass and the Sacraments, and yet

1. This and the following quotations can be sourced in Jean Sullivan’s *Morning Light*, translated by Joseph Cunneen and Patrick Gormally (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 149).

it is still very much in evidence when it comes to calling attention to the exploitation of the poor and the elderly, the inadequate salaries paid to unskilled workers, the proper integration of immigrants into French society.

In Ireland, most priests are in shock at the sudden change in their standing, the hate that their clerical garb can evoke, the unwillingness of many people to listen to what they have to say. The Irish Church needs to find 'glory in its humiliation', as Sullivan put it. And he is far from being pessimistic about the future role the Church can play once it has been stripped of its power and prestige:

Many people have believed in God through the agency of the Church. It now appears that, because of the Church, they no longer can. Undoubtedly that's because they have not encountered its submerged reality. Some of them, who have abandoned the second-rate faith they were taught, have become bold. Perhaps they are living the faith more authentically, as if they needed above all to get rid of borrowed ideas and feelings.

We can identify with many of these sentiments. How many Irish people allowed themselves to confuse the abuse of power, the unhealthy equation of sex with sin, the worldly aspirations of many of the clergy, with the reality of what constitutes the Church? They failed to realise that it was only the human side of the institution they were rejecting. In Sullivan's opinion, nobody ever really 'leaves' the true Church:

But someone who has been truly wounded by the Gospel, and has personally verified that the Church preaches the Word and makes the death and resurrection of Jesus present through the paradox of agony and contempt, can never find a pretext to desert. The one who leaves the Church proves he has never really entered. Or, rather, he drags the Church along with him.

RESIDUES

So where does this leave Catholicism in Ireland at present? In the novels of John McGahern or the poetry of John Montague or Seamus Heaney, it is still very prevalent. However, there is absolutely no refer-

ence to it in Roddy Doyle's *Barrytown Trilogy*, which is presented as an authentic translation of the experiences of contemporary working-class Dubliners, many of whom no longer practise their religion.

Even the example of McGahern is a little skewed as he wrote more about his father's generation than he did about his own. In his most recent novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (2002), which treats of a contemporary context, the majority of the community he depicts living around the lake in rural Ireland still go to Mass, but they are the last of their kind. There are no young people left in the community and in many cases the Mass for the older members is a social occasion in the same way as saving the hay or visiting the neighbours – there is no intellectual engagement with the paradoxes of the Gospel, no real thought given to their religious commitment. There is also a sense in which old pagan traditions have never been fully eradicated, which can be seen from the title of the book. When Jamesie's brother dies, local custom dictates that he should be buried with his head facing the sun, which is based on a pagan practice.

The reality of contemporary Ireland is such that Catholicism is no longer the pressing concern it was for writers who are now over fifty years of age. Archbishop Martin, in the address to which I already referred, makes the point that the understanding of the sacred mysteries, even among people who attend Mass from time to time, is vague and that, in spite of years of catechetical formation and investment in human resources, the Churches are attracting fewer and fewer young people. And he says: 'We now have more than one generation of effectively unchurched young persons.' The repercussions of this will be quite stark in the years ahead and will require serious remedial action if the Church is to have any hope of adequately addressing the issue.

Ireland's increased involvement in the European Union could also threaten the role of the Catholic Church as has been illustrated by the now infamous 'Buttiglione affair'. The case revolves around the nomination of a practising Catholic, Roberto Buttiglione, as Justice and Home Affairs Commissioner of the European Union. When questioned by members of the European Parliament, he stated unequivocally that he

'We now have more than one generation of effectively unchurched young persons.'

believed that homosexuality was a 'sin', echoing a view held by many Catholics. The Civil Liberties' group within the Parliament were strongly of the view that holding such a conviction rendered the man incapable of carrying out his duties as a Commissioner in a dispassionate manner. The fact that Buttiglione stated that, as homosexuality was not a crime, it is not something with which the European Union should concern itself, cut no ice with the questioners. While I do not believe that it was politically astute for a prospective Commissioner to use the word 'sin' in relation to homosexuality, I still maintain that the questions posed in relation to the issue by Breda O'Brien in her *Irish Times* column (October 23, 2004) are as relevant for Ireland as they are for Europe:

Can the EU really claim to represent in any meaningful way all the varied peoples of the Union if it cannot cope with someone expressing views that diverge from whatever the prevailing orthodoxy is?

Have alleged liberals and left-wingers become far more oppressive than the religious institutions they so distrust?

CHANGE OR DECAY?

Even accepting this point, the question of religious institutions being themselves oppressive is unavoidable. There are priests who openly speak out against the 'official line', especially when it comes to women priests and contraception. Fr Brendan Hoban is one of them and he maintains that in order to advance his career under the present pontificate, a cleric needs to conform to certain criteria:

We have had to accept the triumph of incompetent careerists who have successfully played the clerical game – wearing their black clothes, deferring to those who can influence appointments, addressing everyone by their formal ecclesiastical titles, sycophantly (sic) praising every utterance of their superiors, saying all the right things, cultivating all the right people and professing their utter orthodoxy on litmus-test issues of loyalty like celibacy, the ordination of women, *Humanae Vitae* and Marian devotion.²

There is anger in Hoban's book, to the point of oversimplification at

2. Brendan Hoban, *Change or Decay: Irish Catholicism in Crisis* (Kilglass: Banley House, 2004), p. 60.

times. The Church is an organisation like any other, run by men and women with the same sort of drive and ambition as other human beings. It may well be that in order to effect real change, you need to gain access to the corridors of power. It can be annoying, however, to see men appointed to senior pastoral leadership who seem to have no feel for what is needed to bring about rebirth and regeneration, both of which are badly needed at present. Hoban acknowledges that when he writes:

If you are part of a tradition, it is very difficult to become part of the dismantling of the same tradition. If you give a wedge of your life to any activity, it is extremely difficult to stand back and set that work in a realistic context. The bigger the institution, the more sacred the tradition, the more difficult it is to ask hard questions about it. (*Change or Decay*, p. 69)

Hoban himself has found that expressing his controversial views has led to his being ostracised by the clerical club. Surely it is possible, even within an institution like the Catholic Church, to raise a voice of protest, to suggest ways in which you feel the wrong agenda is being pursued? Just as I would greatly dislike the scapegoating of Buttiglione by members of the European Parliament for expressing his religious convictions (if this is indeed what happened), I also find it abhorrent that priests who point to defects within the Catholic Church find themselves out in the cold. Hoban says of his own case:

Saying the awkward word has meant exclusion from the clerical club: the resentment of my colleagues; the unwanted attention of bishops, my own and others who sought to pressure them; the confusion of my parishioners; sometimes even the hurt of family and friends. (*Change or Decay*, p. 10)

WITNESSING TO CHRIST

I detect the same hurt in these lines as is often evident in Sullivan. The latter was fortunate to have a bishop who allowed him to devote himself exclusively to his writing and didn't interfere with his liberty of expression. But he was viewed as a maverick by many French priests and even his mother struggled when he arrived to visit her dressed in civilian clothes or when he criticised the abuse of power he detected in the French

Church of the 1960s and 70s. As far as he was concerned, however, his vocation was to be a witness to Christ. When that led to the pain of exclusion and incomprehension, he felt that it was in some way natural. The Christian path is not meant to be about comfort and security; it implies a

The Christian path implies a constant uprooting, an unending quest for a grail that continually beckons us further and deeper.

constant uprooting, an unending quest for a grail that continually beckons us further and deeper.

At times in Ireland, there is far too much mutual distrust between the clergy and others, be they the faithful or non-believers. The ghetto mentality has been increased by the clerical sex

scandals, which prompted the most serious reappraisal of the role of the Church in Ireland of the modern era. Had the Church been less dictatorial in regard to sexual morality, more inclined to see grey areas when it came to the interpretation of dogma, the reaction to these revelations may well have been less virulent among the laity. While elements in the Church believed that the media sought at all times to sully its reputation and that the revelations were part of this concerted campaign to bring down the institution, the media, for their part, found their dealings with the hierarchy in relation to the revelations of wrongdoing by a small number of priests, evasive and, at times, dishonest.

What was needed was a prophetic and authentic voice like that of the late Joseph Veale S.J., who, in 2000, wrote the best article I have ever read on the subject. In his view, the wound inflicted by the clerical abuse scandal was nothing so superficial as the loss of influence or diminished power. It went far deeper than that, right to the core of how Irish people related to the Catholic Church. If there had been evidence of genuine repentance from the beginning, it might have been possible to forgive. It is worth quoting at some length from Fr Veale's article:

The Church is in shock. Many are in denial. The disclosure of sex-abuse and cruelty came when people were already disenchanted with the church, with the whole set-up, with religion in general. That goes back a long way. It was masked by a smugness on the part of the official Church and a deference and conformism in the presence of clergy. ... The sin-less priest, not fully human, was a fiction. No one really

believed it, but it served a purpose to pretend. The revelations of abuse fell into a culture that for decades had seen through clerical screens.³

Veale rightly detected that the experience of Catholicism that many Irish people had was a negative one: 'That their sexual lives, the central energy of their humanity, whether they are married or not, were mucked up by Catholicism' (p. 298). Like Archbishop Martin, Fr Veale said that the Church needed to reflect on its (ab)use of power before it could adequately repent. He also wondered to what extent the 'nerviness of the Church in the face of *eros*' (p. 301) conveyed an uneasiness with their own sexuality among the celibate male system.

His analysis of the situation leads him to the conclusion that the problems of the Irish Catholic Church were beginning to manifest themselves long before the revelations of abuse. Lay people were far better educated in the 1970s than they had been before that and were not willing meekly to obey pronouncements from the pulpit with which they disagreed. The clerical mindset was not particularly adept at listening, especially to criticism. Veale then makes a comment which echoes with the first quotation I gave you from Jean Sullivan: 'The loss of power will turn out to have been a blessing. We will need to let go generously and freely because it is closer to the mind of Christ' (p. 302).

It is unfortunate that the hierarchy in this country did not possess the prescience and moral courage of Fr Veale. To be fair, it is not as easy to be honest when one holds a position of power within an institution. You are often prevented from expressing your most deeply felt convictions by an obligation to toe the party line or by what you perceive as your duty to those you are obliged to lead. But surely there are times when pragmatism and loyalty to the institution must give way to the need to bear witness to the truth.

Morale among the priests and religious in this country at the moment is at an all-time low because they feel they have been hung out to dry by a dithering leadership whose main preoccupation has been to hold on desperately to the last vestiges of power. The danger is that if the situation continues the way it is going, there will be little or nothing to hang on to.

3. 'Meditating of Abuse - and Repenting', in *Doctrine & Life*, May-June 2000, pp. 296-303, pp. 297-8.

A reassessment of the involvement of the laity in the running of the Church is long overdue. A dialogue between the stakeholders needs to ascertain exactly what this partnership should involve – a compromise that would respect, on the one side, the sacramental ministry that is at the heart of priesthood and an acknowledgement, on the other, that since Vatican II the Church is meant to be ‘the people of God.’ A positive finding in recent surveys shows that while many Irish Catholics have issues with the Pope, cardinals and bishops on many points, they declare themselves more than satisfied with their local priests.

Archbishop Martin declared on his appointment that he wanted to see a ‘humble listening Church’ develop in Ireland. That would be welcome. If it were to take place, a less virulent form of secularism might appear. But the Church can only be responsible for its own ministry: it cannot control the attitudes it engenders in others. The Gospel, with its call for people to take risks, to question all ideologies, including religious ones, in order to accede to a higher plane of spirituality, is what ultimately will open minds and hearts and lead to liberation. On this point, I’ll conclude with the words of Sullivan:

And why should the Gospels be readily accepted? Breath, rhythm, gesture, parable and paradox – poems – are at once simple and secret, and can be only gradually unveiled. A poem accomplishes what it speaks of, but through a process that is never complete. The persons who receive it must return into darkness where they will never finish exploring it.⁴

4. *Morning Light*, p. 22.

NEXT MONTH

Is the Vatican Right to Support Genetically Modified Plants?

SEÁN McDONAGH