A Catholic Childhood in Philadelphia

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A Catholic Childhood in Philadelphia

A few years ago, I was requested to chair an event at the Dublin Writers' Festival. My duties required me to read an extremely interesting memoir by the Irish-American author, humourist and critic with *The Guardian, New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, Joe Queenan. The memoir, entitled *Closing Time* (Picador, 2009), is a searingly honest recreation of Queenan's Philadelphia childhood, a childhood that was marred by an abusive alcoholic father and a mother who withdrew deeper and deeper into depression and failed to protect her children from her husband's viciousness. This book has a particular message for us in Ireland in the wake of the publication of the Ryan and Murphy Reports and the revelations therein of the abuses visited on innocent Irish children in the recent past. One quote from Queenan's book resonates with the testimony of many abuse victims: 'As a child, hamstrung by the sense of guilt that all Catholics are born with, [...] I often wondered if it was something we had done, or said that made him (the father) beat us.' (p.13)

What is particularly striking about *Closing Time* is the way in which Irish-American families often retained the same brand of repressive Catholicism that existed in this country. Superstition and devotional practices dominated the Queenan home, and especially the behaviour of the father: 'Like many Irish-Catholic men of his generation, he would never dream of raising his hand to his wife, not only because he feared it would down the curtain on their marriage, but because men like him had an unwholesome reverence for their spouses, viewing them as domestic stand-ins for the Virgin Mary, with the one notable difference that, unlike the Madonna, they also cooked and cleaned.' (p.11)

The children were fair game, however, and they were often beaten with a belt, the buckle of which sometimes cut into the boys' testicles. Jobs were secured and lost quickly when the abrasive personality came to the fore or the drinking caused the father to miss a day or two of work. The poverty and the beatings were bad enough, but certain key incidents left deep scars that could never be mended. For example, Joe's uncle Jim presented him with a beautiful train set that was assembled on the dining room table. The young boy was in ecstasy until his mother requested him to go out and buy some pound cake and cookies for the guests. On his return, he witnessed remorsefully the carnage: '[...] my father had jacked up the transformer to full speed and sent the entire set of trains hurtling off the table onto the harsh linoleum floor.' (p.16) The engine was kaput, the boy's happiness destroyed.
Education was the one way out of the squalor of the housing project and the helpless neighbourhood in which the Queenans lived. The debt owed to the Catholic Church is acknowledged: ‘Three things kept us going during these wilderness years: the Catholic Church, the generosity of the few relatives who did not abandon us in our time of need, and the public library.’ (p.51) The cash donations, the ‘pageantry-laden rituals’ and the superb education of the nuns in Elementary School were indispensable in keeping the Queenans afloat. It was probably as a result of the positive role of the Church in his life that made Joe believe he had a vocation. Also, the theatrical side of the priesthood appealed to him. He entered Junior Seminary for the following reasons: ‘a craving for prestige, an aversion to working at a nine-to-five job, and most important, an all-consuming desire to get out of my father’s house forever.’ (p.152)

Almost no one who went through the Maryknoll Junior Seminary between 1964 and 1966 became a priest. It was a period when the Catholic Church in America was being assailed on all sides by the political, racial and cultural conflict that characterised America at the time. Queenan figured that the replacement of the Latin ritual with the uninspiring folk Masses had a deleterious effect, with the accompanying ‘introduction of a sinister camaraderie among parishioners, manifested in compulsory handshakes and prefabricated words of mandatory cheer.’ (p.167) With such an attitude it is not surprising that Queenan would leave the seminary after a short period.

Thanks to the education he received initially from the nuns, and subsequently in the seminary, and in the Cardinal Dougherty high school, the young man was in a good position to achieve academic success. He managed to do well enough in French in college to be offered a scholarship to study for a year in Paris, which proved to be an uplifting experience. At this stage, Queenan was devouring books in English and French and had recovered from a failed suicide attempt brought on by continuing difficulties with his father: ‘Why I would risk ending my life rather than walking out of his is impossible to explain; nor do I fully understand why I spent so many years seeking the approval of a man I did not respect, much less love.’ (p.284) It is not surprising, given the problematic relationship he had with his father, that John McGahern’s The Dark should have been such a seminal novel for Queenan. He suddenly realized that he was not the only person to be exposed to such problems. Like young Mahoney in McGahern’s novel, the relationship between Joe and his father changed irremediably on the day the son assumed the dominant role by striking the older man: “What I saw was no longer a dangerous man armed with his fists and a belt. What I saw before me was a paunchy, middle-aged drunk who...
The very title of this book must strike one in the eye. This is a serious subject. Catholics all over Europe are leaving the Church. Others are holding on by a thread. The persons who are leaving, some with anger others with regret, do so to save their souls, their integrity, and their very identities. Now it is Ireland’s turn.

The Catholic people of Ireland have suffered a heavy blow to their Faith and to the trust they had in their priests and bishops. As understanding as they have always been regarding the faults and foibles of their clergy—whether he was fond of a drink or went on and on every Sunday—a line has been crossed. These last almost twenty years—since the fall of the Reynolds government—have been traumatic for the ordinary Catholic in the parish. Even the eldest have been hard hit and have had to rethink their loyalty. The youngest have cleared out. They want nothing to do with the Church. Most of the clergy, loyal,