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Eamon Maher
Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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Review Article

The Legacy of Broken Faith

EAMON MAHER

ONE OF THE advantages of a crisis within any human institution is that it generates fracture, encourages re-evaluation, self-criticism, and, occasionally, anger. In April 2011, a conference was organised in Milltown Institute around the theme of Broken Faith: Re-visioning the Church in Ireland.

I had the privilege of attending this event and contributed to a round table discussion that was chaired by Joe Little of RTÉ. I sensed on my arrival in Milltown the extent to which the participants were fully engaged with what was happening. At each session there was ample time allowed for questions and observations from the floor, some of which were emotional and hard-hitting. No attempt was made to disguise the challenges the Catholic Church in Ireland is facing. Equally, there was a general acknowledgement of the mistakes that had been made and that led to the diminution of the institution’s reputation and the affection it inspired in generations of Irish people. Finally, an attempt was made to discover how one might find some hope in the midst of such obvious despair.

People from various backgrounds attended: priests and religious, academics, survivors of clerical abuse, committed Catholics, sceptical Catholics, agnostics, atheists, people who were looking for change, others who would prefer a return to a pre-Vatican II model of Church. In my mind, it is no coincidence that the event took place in the Milltown Institute, which enjoys an autonomy that is not always available to Catholic organisations. Such autonomy enabled the institute to host a gathering that was openly critical of the Church’s woefully inept handling of the clerical child abuse scandals that have inflicted deep wounds that will take a long time to heal, if they do, in fact, ever heal.

This article seeks to provide an overview of the book of essays that has emerged from the Milltown conference, Broken Faith: Why Hope Matters.1 In what is an excellent Introduction, one of the co-editors and the main organiser of the event, Patrick Claffey, describes how the publication in recent years of the Ferns, Ryan, Murphy and Cloyne reports has been calamitous for the Church:

The cumulative effect of all these has been devastating, as they revealed shocking levels of psychological, physical and sexual abuse by religious, both male and female, in institutions under church patronage, and child sexual abuse by clergy in all the dioceses thus far audited.

In the wake of such compelling narratives of pain and suffering inflicted on largely innocent and vulnerable children, there is, in Claffey’s view, a wide range of emotions: ‘disbelief, sadness, shame, hurt, guilt, anger, but also a deep sense of confusion and loss’ (p. 2).

The edited book seeks to address these emotions and to make some sense out of them. The Introduction supplies an overview of the various reports and then muses on how we might come to terms with what is ‘a complex situation’. From a position where religious practice in Ireland was already in sharp decline before the scandals, what we are witnessing since is a heightening of the process of secularisation in a vastly changed religious landscape:

[T]he public profile of the Church is all but non-existent, except in the most negative terms; and there is a perceptible rise in a sharp anti-clericalism which leaves clergy deeply demoralised and religious bodies more or less muted in public debate ... (p. 18).

The downside of this development is that the poor and marginalised are in danger of losing their most influential champion and those desirous of belonging to a vibrant Church are often left disappointed.

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1. Patrick Claffey, Joe Egan, Marie Keenan (editors), Broken Faith: Why Hope Matters, volume 10 in the series ‘Studies in Theology, Society and Culture’, 2013, Oxford / Bern, Peter Lang, 323 pp., pbk. All further references to this work are given within the text and in brackets.

Eamon Maher has co-edited (with John Littleton) four collections of essays on contemporary Irish Catholicism. He is currently writing a monograph on the twentieth century Catholic novel.
by what they experience at ceremonies that are often performed by overworked, elderly priests who are generally demoralised by what has happened to the institution to which they dedicated their lives.

PATRIARCHY AND MASCULINITY

Instead of attempting to discuss all the essays in Broken Faith, I have decided to give a brief sketch of what I consider to be the more challenging and pertinent points that are raised by the contributors. To begin, in her exploration of the legacy of institutional abuse, Bernadette Fahy argues how the Church displays a skewed view of perceived sexual promiscuity between men and women: 'I find it interesting that the men who impregnated our mothers were never called “fallen men”, dirty men, bad men, rapists or paedophiles. We know that thousands of women and children were incarcerated in Magdalene asylums and laundries too, where some, for the remainder of their lives, washed away their “sins” (p. 32). Later on, she reinforces what she considers a glaring inconsistency in the Church’s attitude:

I often felt and believe to this day, that only when it was realised that boys had been sexually abused in Irish industrial schools was sexual abuse of children in the institutions taken seriously, in a way that it hadn’t been for girls. In a parallel development, although women spoke publicly of abuse by diocesan priests, the issue was taken more seriously when males began to speak openly of sexual abuse by diocesan clergy. It seemed to me that the powers of Church and State took the view that physical, emotional, spiritual and sexual abuse was more acceptable in the case of females than it was in the case of males (p. 36).

This is a valid assertion, imputable perhaps to the millennia-old patriarchal mindset that has dominated the upper echelons of the Catholic Church. A stand-out essay by the psychotherapist, academic and author Marie Keenan, emphasises how Irish seminarians in the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s were taught to look on themselves as a cut above the laity whom it was their duty to serve: ‘[I]n practice generations of clergy and of Irish Catholic laity subscribed to a model of Church in which the institutional dichotomy between clergy and laity was effectively insurmountable’ (p. 94). Deference towards men of the cloth led to civil servants, Gardaí and whole communities failing to respond adequately when they learned of the sexual abuse of Irish children by priests. She concludes:

No one in Ireland stands outside of the responsibility and accountability dock on this matter, despite one’s relative positioning on the continuum of knowing. However, in the dialectics of blame, it is usual for blame to shift around in line with power relations, as pointing fingers at others and away from self masks or deflects the pain of such a terrible knowing of one’s part in the sorrow and abuse of so many children (pp. 100-101).

CLERICALISM

Keenan touches on the issue of clericalism in her essay and this is reinforced by Thomas Whelan, who sensibly defines what he means exactly by the term: “Clericalism” refers to how the internal structures of Church can serve to establish or maintain a relationship of power. The term can also name attitudes of superiority, privilege and elitism of one group (clergy) over others, sometimes supported by canonical and theological rhetoric’ (p.181). Thinking of oneself as being part of a ‘special’ or elite group whose members are more important than the general populace can obviously lead to the type of malfunctioning that is highlighted in the various reports to which we have already referred. Whelan laments how a ‘culture of clericalism’ resulted ‘in a failure of Church to reach out to victims and survivors of various forms of clerical abuse’ (p.212). A culture does not change overnight and the Church will need to be constantly aware of the human desire for power and privilege and guard against its hold on those belonging to the ‘ordained priesthood’, who are as much in danger of recidivism as any other elite grouping.

RE-DISCOVERING THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE

In a sophisticated analysis of how hope matters, Michael Cronin notes that Ireland in recent times has become a fearful, distrustful
society: ‘More CCTV, more gardaí, more micro-managerialism, more mandatory prison sentences, more audits – in the garrison state the only antidote to fear is the endless extension of control’ (p. 109).

Reflecting on the manner in which suicide and self-harm bring into sharp contrast the vulnerability of the body to our mental states, Cronin cites Michel Foucault’s view that corporeal discipline by Church and State ‘has been fundamental to the emergence of modern society’. From this insight, Cronin extrapolates the following:

A decisive shift in the relationship to the body comes with the advent of secularisation. The disappearance of the notion of the afterlife entails the disappearance of a place or a time when rewards and punishments are handed out in a court of divine justice. If there is no life beyond the grave, then the ultimate punishment becomes the grave itself, the ultimate reward the indefinite duration of life in the extended parenthesis of the Golden Years (pp. 115-116).

This is a telling appraisal of how many Irish people, as they slowly began to turn away from traditional religion with its consolations and certainties, were left with the prospect of earthly existence being the only existence: hence this life had to be pleasure-laden, full of intense experiences, a life that was an end in itself. Death in the Christian perspective takes precedence over life: ‘What is implicit in the recognition of the centrality of death in a human experience is the acceptance of human finitude. Taking human finitude seriously means taking human life seriously. It means focusing on ends, not means. It means focusing on what counts, not on what is countable’ (p.120).

In Cronin’s view, the Christian message that death is not an end but a beginning ‘has a potentially powerful resonance in the recovery of a sense of human finitude as the basis of a new set of values’ (p. 120). Rediscovering the original messages of the Christian tradition, in particular ‘the enduring contribution of hope to human betterment’ (p. 121), could help allay some of the fear that is in danger of paralysing the Irish psyche.

BUREAUCRACY

John L. Allen, Senior Correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter and a man who is reputedly better informed on Vatican affairs than any of his fellow journalists, examines how the Church has a difficult job in effecting reform because of its cumbersome bureaucracy and the cleavage that exists between the West, where religion is in sharp decline, and the developing world, where it is flourishing.

Allen cites a statistic that certainly surprised me: cumulatively, the number of priests in the Catholic Church has grown from 405,000 in 2000 to 410,000 in 2010. An increase in vocations in Africa and Asia has therefore more than offset the decline in Europe and North America, a fact that does not suggest an institution on the verge of collapse. The net effect of the sexual abuse crisis has been the strengthening of what Allen refers to as the ‘fortress’ current at senior levels in the Church (p. 77). Rather than the crisis resulting in a reconfiguration of tribal prejudices, Allen argues that it has, in fact, cemented them:

Consider the best-known book on the crisis: in most cases, they have been penned by authors who already had a strong sense of the rights and wrongs in the Church well before the dam broke, and who simply applied pre-existing formulae to parsing blame. On the left, the usual villains were trotted out: celibacy, a negative view of sex, patriarchy and authoritarianism. The same pattern holds on the right: doctrinal dissent, inadequate priestly discipline, relativism and moral decay (p.80).

This analysis caused me to interrogate the extent to which the essays in Broken Faith are representative of both the liberal and conservative wings of the Catholic Church. My conclusion – and this should not necessarily be viewed as a criticism – is that the vast majority of the contributors would lean to the left rather than to the right. In the interests of fairness and balance, I wonder if the editors of Broken Faith might have been well-advised to seek out contributors with a wider range of points of view and approach. It could possibly betray my own bias that I find myself in general agreement with the opinions expressed in all the essays. It would have been perhaps desirable to include some more contrarian voices in order to avoid the danger of people talking to others of like-minded views.

Dáire Keogh explains how the historian walks a tight rope between
hagiography and horror when faced with the prospect of assessing issues associated with the Church’s past. In his history of the Christian Brothers, Keogh’s task was to somehow provide a balanced view of the undoubted achievements of Edmund Rice and the Christian Brothers, while at the same time being aware of what has come to light in more recent times about the trauma inflicted on so many young people in the Industrial Schools for which the order was given responsibility. Keogh asserts, and I agree with him, that the State and Irish society were complicit in what went on in places like Artane and Letterfrack and that the narrative is a lot more complex than some commentators are prepared to acknowledge.

IF ONLY VATICAN II REFORMS HAD PREVAILED

In fairness to the editors, the contributors do come from a broad spectrum of backgrounds and they are not afraid to ask the hard questions about the Church’s policies and activities, out of ‘love’ for the institution, as theologian Gerard Mannion puts it. He says that it is time for a serious change of mentality: ‘The Church as a whole can and must welcome the scrutiny and critique that are the only means by which truth, justice, healing and a more life-giving and faithful future for all can come about’ (p. 233). He says that this is particularly true of Church leaders, the College of Bishops and the Roman Curia, groups that are not renowned for welcoming the type of close scrutiny that Mannion recommends.

Referring to Pope Benedict’s Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland, in which he blamed relativism, the abandonment of family prayer, the overly liberal interpretation of the precepts of Vatican II by priests and religious as contributory causes of the clerical abuse scandals in Ireland, Mannion counters that had the reforms of Vatican II been allowed to flourish, ‘then we would have seen an earlier addressing of the abuse crisis and the related issues of the failings of the ecclesial leadership’ (p. 236). Later in the chapter, we read the following exhortation:

But the world that the Church is called to serve cries out for a mission and message that is relevant, socially and existentially transformative (as the gospel message always has been) and is proclaimed in languages and terms that reach out to people in the midst of their struggles in relation to what it is and means to be human and in relation to the God who called the world into existence (pp. 250-251).

CONSULTATION TOWARDS A NEW VISION

In the following chapter, Gerry O’Hanlon wonders if it will be possible to rebuild trust in the Catholic Church. If there has been a drift towards a more secularised view of life, as seems beyond doubt, this is partly due to the lack of genuine consultation with its stakeholders by the Church hierarchy, the continued absence of women within most of its decision-making bodies and the teaching on sexuality that ‘is foreign to the experience of many good believers and is received with incredulity’ (p. 260). O’Hanlon reckons that there is a definite need for a new vision within the Church, one that would attempt to foster a better interaction between faith and culture, in order to go beyond the ‘non-intellectual streak in the religious culture of Ireland’ that was noted by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin.

Much of O’Hanlon’s chapter involves a dialogue with the opinions expressed by Martin in an address given to the Cambridge Group of Irish Studies at Magdalene College (February 2011) in which he made no attempt to disguise the huge task that faces the Church in Ireland:

The change that has taken place in Irish culture requires radical change in the life of the Church to such an extent that in the face of it even experts in change management would feel daunted. Certainly I would have to say that despite all my efforts I am failing in my attempts to lead such change. Change management has to have the patience and the strategy to bring everyone along with it and that may not be my talent.

O’Hanlon wonders if the Archbishop is not asking too much of himself by posing the wrong question:

But surely he is not being asked so much to suddenly develop new talents as rather to allow others to express theirs, in particular to exhibit ‘strong leadership’ not so much by always wanting to lead from the front himself (and then being discouraged when people do not follow), as by encouraging the rest of us […] to have our
say and then to use his own considerable gifts to articulate this new reality? (p. 273)

I like this suggestion and think that it has definite purchase. All too often Martin is seen as a maverick voice within the Irish hierarchy, the darling of the media and the one person capable of reaching out to the victims of abuse. But would there not be value in his turning a perceived weakness (a difficulty with teamwork) into a strength by involving others in the mammoth task that confronts him and those remaining members of the lay faithful? He would need to act quickly.

I hope that it will be clear from the snapshots I have provided that readers of Doctrine & Life will be encouraged to acquire a copy of this significant contribution to the assessment of the 'Broken Faith' that characterises the current Irish Church and the importance of hope in the midst of apparent darkness. In the concluding chapter, one of the co-editors Joe Egan outlines the challenges ahead:

Repairing that damage and ensuring that such can never happen again will be anything but easy; it will involve taking a hard look at ourselves and at how religious life is lived and priestly ministry and hierarchical authority are exercised, as a prelude to genuine service of the gospel in imitation of Christ; it will also require a humble engagement on the part of the Church leaders with scholarly expertise from every field, together with a willingness by them to engage with the grassroots’ experience as a genuine *locus theologicus* – not an irritating irrelevance to be simply ignored – so that their proclamations may be all the more effective… (p. 305)

Hopefully this book will be a first step in a phase of hope and renewal for those who still remain open to the possibility for change within the monolithic structure that is the Catholic Church.