

The Challenges Facing the Church in Ireland in the Aftermath of the Ryan Report

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Introduction

The mission of the Church in every age and context is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Church always needs to be prepared to read ‘the signs of the times’ and to enquire how it can renew itself to be faithful to that mission. The Ryan Report published in May 2009, the Ferns Report published in 2005, and undoubtedly the issues which will emerge from the report into sexual abuse in the Archdiocese of Dublin, raise very serious challenges for the whole People of God in Ireland now and in the immediate future.

The challenges relate to the question: How can the Gospel be proclaimed with any integrity, given this very painful and dark history? I see two challenges emerging. Firstly, it is impossible to move forward without embarking on some attempts to heal our past. I believe that we need to create a climate within which we can arrive at some understanding of the factors that contributed to an environment in which such abuse was possible and could go unchallenged.

We need to do this in a way that acknowledges the complexity of the aetiology of the problem and avoids simply ‘scapegoating’ or resorting to what Marie Keenan refers to as the dominant discourses on child sexual abuse.¹ We need to have wide-ranging conversations, and to hear in particular the stories of those who have suffered most, survivors here in Ireland but also those who went abroad. We also need to hear from religious sisters and brothers, the vast majority of whom dedicated their entire lives to a caring role but are now devastated, confused and in despair.

Secondly, as John Waters has pointed out,² there is a danger in smugly condemning the past instead of asking questions about the present. While we are aware that the power of the Catholic Church in Ireland during the period covered by the Ryan Report was a major factor in allowing abuse to happen, the question we need to ask is whether the systemic forces in the present organisation of our relationships in the Church exhibit some of these same toxic dynamics. I am not at all convinced that this question is being faced within the Church today.

Different Generational Responses

Before developing those two points further, I do want to acknowledge the reality that the Ryan Report and the other reports may be received differently by different age groups.

This had not struck me so forcibly until I read a very insightful article by Joe O’Riordan, a twenty-seven year old teacher – an article published in the collection edited by Tony Flannery, *Responding to the Ryan Report*.³ O’Riordan speaks about feeling detachment from the Report; this, he explains, does not mean he does not care but simply that the events it recounts are beyond the limits of his experience. He goes on to ask the appropriate questions about the factors and circumstances prevailing in Ireland at the time which allowed the abuse to continue without anyone shouting, ‘halt’.

Reflecting on his own experience of the Catholic Church today, O’Riordan describes it as authoritarian, out of touch, talks too much and does too little, does not practice what it preaches and is in danger of becoming irrelevant to the younger generation, particularly in relation to sexuality. However, for me his most telling sentence was when he said that the relationship between the Church and its ‘followers’ needs to become a dialogue of equals.

What is revealed to me here, and in further statements he makes, is the author’s identification of the Church with priests and hierarchy. He does not make reference to the theology of Vatican II and the concept of the Church as the People of God but what he is naming for us is the reality he experiences on the ground today. He obviously sees no evidence of collaborative ministry.

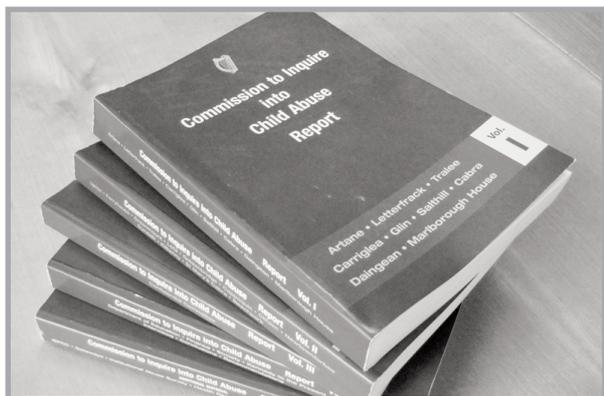
I cannot say how representative this reflection is; however, having family of that age-group myself I find it rings true. So among some in the young adult population it is clear the various reports on abuse are further confirmation that the Church is irrelevant; that it is uncaring, authoritarian, not prepared to listen and, therefore, not worthy of being presumed to provide authentic moral leadership. This is a very difficult atmosphere in which to proclaim the Good News and it is an

especially serious challenge at a time when there is such great need for our younger people to find tangible and meaningful anchors.

Understanding the Past

While that is one element of the challenge, I am aware of a much more complex challenge faced by the Church in the aftermath of the reports. What is clear from other articles in the publication, *Responding to the Ryan Report*, is that detachment is not the experience of many. It is in this cohort I place myself.

When I was invited to write an article on this topic I was initially very reluctant. Reflecting on this, I became very aware that I knew I was incapable of detached analysis and I thought that might be a problem. Actually, there can be no other way. I am now convinced that those of us above a certain age who knew at some level of our being what was happening need to have conversations.



The five volumes of the Ryan Report

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We need to come to some understanding of the collective, traumatic and very complex history that is ours and is embedded in our psyche. While our faith and hope as Christians encourages us to bring the healing light of Christ to this dark history, we cannot fast-forward the process; we need first of all to respect the integrity of the experiences.

This healing, like the healing of any wound, has to be allowed to take time and has to happen from the inside out. It cannot be choreographed by any promises or guidelines for the future. Peoples' stories need to be listened to. This is certainly not the time for blaming, scapegoating, or simplistic analysis. Marie Keenan, who has considerable experience of working with victims and

perpetrators of sexual crime, argues that if we want to help children and create a safer society for all men, women and children in Ireland today then we need to get beyond a blaming stance and move towards more preventative, as well as rehabilitative and restorative, perspectives.⁴ I believe that is true.

From many years experience of working with groups representing different traditions in Northern Ireland I am aware how slow the healing process is. If we are to respond to the challenges thrown up by the various reports, we need to embark on that journey together. One of the challenges facing us is to be truthful about that time in Ireland; otherwise, it is like a dark spectre where various shadowy figures of good and evil, grace and disgrace, intertwine and ultimately paralyse, leaving us unfree to live the fullness of life and to relate to one another in a loving way.

Control and Deference

Many factors contributed to the catalogue of events outlined in the Ryan and other reports. It is very difficult to explain to people who have not experienced it how powerful and controlling the Catholic Church in Ireland was right throughout this period. The authority of the Church in matters of Church and State was almost total. The majority held the Church in deference. Those who dared to challenge this suffered the consequences.

My sense is that it was only in the general worldwide paradigm shifts starting in the 1960s that our critical faculties woke up and we began asking questions about the Church. Vatican II was itself an expression of that new critical awareness and represented major changes in theological thinking which one could argue still remain aspirational rather than operative.

Theology

The Church's own poor theology was an important factor in producing psychologically unhealthy human beings during that period. Theology at that time focused on a judgemental God and the redemption of the soul, ignoring the reality of mind, body and heart. Sean Fagan argues that it was the Church's own bad theology which was largely responsible for the abuses that have now come to light.⁵ He refers to centuries long negative understanding of sexuality.

From my work as a counsellor and spiritual director, I have no doubt this theology was psychologically damaging to very many human beings and left them extremely vulnerable when

placed in a caring role. The rigid and controlling models of formation characteristic of this period displayed little or no knowledge of healthy psychological development.⁶ From our perspective today, this seems amazing, but it is not surprising given that when I studied psychology in the late 1960s psychology as a profession was in the early stages in Ireland. We must also remember that it was not until the mid to late 1970s that child sexual abuse acquired its present terminology and understanding.

Social and Economic Conditions

The historical period covered by the Ryan Report was one of real poverty in Ireland. There were large families, small incomes and very poor standards of living. That these familial and social conditions resulted in widespread child deprivation is evident in the sheer numbers who ended up in institutions. Institutions were part of our landscape. As others have pointed out, we *did* know of their existence.⁷ We also knew the children when they came to our homes for a break in the summer or when we saw them out walking.

Even as ‘knowers’ (although I don’t think any of us could have known the extent of the abuse), a range of factors prevented us acting and that, I believe, is part of the collective guilt we are left with in this contemporary climate of critical awareness. The State appears to have been quite happy at the time to renege on what we today would consider to be its responsibility in the eyes of our Constitution – to care for all its citizens equally.

In truth, a huge part of our history in Ireland is the dedicated work of so many religious women and men in the fields of education, nursing and care and we must give voice to that. My first employment as a psychologist in the early 1970s was in the area of learning disabilities. The facilities in this field in Ireland at the time were extremely poor and children often ended up in Dickensian mental hospitals. I experienced the heroic and pioneering work done by religious orders together with parents’ and friends’ groups in this field.

Hearing the Voices of those Abused

Against a background of economic and social deprivation, and a culture of deference to authority, it is clear that terrible abuse happened. One could not remain unmoved by the harrowing stories told by those who suffered most in these institutions. We hear these voices in the Ryan

Report. We heard them very movingly in the recent TV3 documentary on the forgotten Irish which told the stories of those who ended up in England and, of course, we have heard them through reports and documentaries over the last number of years.

I found Daire Keogh’s reflection on Peter Tyrell’s memoir particularly harrowing.⁸ Through his reflections, I could sense a child’s vulnerability but also the sheer psychological poverty of the institutional climate. The impact of this moving memoir is heightened by the tragedy of Peter’s suicide on Hampstead Heath in 1967. As I write this, I am aware of the voices that will be added to this number when the long-awaited report on the Archdiocese of Dublin is published.

It is right that these voices, silenced for so long, have priority at this time. Long-term, however, justice demands that we must also listen to other voices. Many elderly religious men and women are also really struggling to understand the past. In time, we need to bring compassion and understanding to this broader canvas.

The Church Today

Can we say that the climate within the Church today is more healthy and that we can preach the Gospel with integrity? I feel we have not begun to tackle the issues that are at the heart of the problem. Many of the same institutional factors which proved to be key in the aetiology of abuse in our Church in the past are still in place.

I would draw particular attention to the issue of power and the way we manage our relationships within the Church. The other related issue is that of sexuality – including the lack of a developed contemporary theology of sexuality informed by both psychology and the word of God, and the question of a continued requirement of compulsory celibacy for clergy.

Sexuality and Human Relationships

Looking at the issue of compulsory celibacy, my experience working with priests over the years has been that while celibacy is discussed in the seminary and a free and informed commitment is made to it at ordination, nothing prepares priests for the living out of it in day-to-day life. Different men cope with the challenge in different ways, but given the reality that a healthy expression of their sexuality in the context of a committed

relationship is not an acceptable part of clerical life, problems of one sort or another may arise. Only very rarely are there opportunities for honesty and open discussion. This leads to a climate of silence, secrecy, collusion and denial.

Lurking in the background to all of this is the subtle implication that celibacy is the spiritually superior way of life. This climate is not conducive to developing a healthy understanding of sexuality. When I was studying theology I did so alongside clerical students. I am now aware that my presence as a married woman provided a good balance. We had open conversations about the meaning of sexuality and the challenges associated with various ways of responding to that gift in our lives.

I would suggest that this is a healthier model of formation than that provided in an all-male clerical environment. Such honest, open and inclusive conversations are urgently needed in our country at this time, particularly if we are to offer a credible sexual ethic to our younger generation.

While I fully understand the context within which the current policies on child protection have been introduced, I have some reservations about the direction they have taken in practice. Of course, we need to protect our children and vulnerable adults – that is essential. But I believe we do so primarily by providing a context designed to foster healthy human beings who can relate in mature and honest ways rather than introducing requirements governing relationships. Such an approach has the effect of creating more anxiety, artificiality and isolation and is a denial of the fact we are relational beings.

Power Relationships within the Church

The issue of power and how we manage our relationships as the whole People of God is more difficult to process and articulate but this issue is at the heart of the challenge to the Church as it seeks to emerge from the aftermath of the various reports. We preach the Good News far more effectively by the way we *are* than by what we *say*. The question we need to ask ourselves is: What message is being conveyed by the way we are as Church in Ireland today? I would suggest that the impression of the Church outlined by Joe O’Riordan would not be uncommon.

The theology of Vatican II is particularly rich in relation to the Church. The first chapter of *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), puts before us a profound understanding of the

Church as communion.⁹ As Leahy points out, communion is the fundamental dimension of Church, which reflects the ‘triumphant, dialogical, community-mystery of God, the mutually giving, receiving, being-for-one-another God’.¹⁰

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Of particular note in *Lumen Gentium* is that the chapter on Church as ‘People of God’ appears ahead of that on hierarchy. The significance of this organisation of the chapters was the recovery of the full share in the life and mission of the Church arising out of Baptism. The 1985 Synod of Bishops, held to celebrate and reaffirm Vatican II, outlined the ecclesiology of communion. It concluded that the structures and relations within the Church must express the communion in a new style of collaboration between lay people and clergy so as to enable the carrying out of the Church’s mission.

How Much Has Changed?

I would love to say that we have enthusiastically received the theology of Vatican II and that this is evident in the way we are and in how we relate within the Church.

Much *has* changed for the better since the 1950s and 1960s. There is plenty of evidence that the theology of Vatican II has come alive in pastoral initiatives all over the country. Pastoral councils are an emerging feature of our landscape and there are some communities where a genuinely collaborative style of ministry is happening.

Collaborative ministry is a way of relating and working together in the life of the Church that expresses the communion which the Church is given and to which it is called. The quality of the relationships is as important as the task. Therefore, one would imagine that our relationships in the Church would feel like a dialogue of equals. In practice, I believe, we have a very long way to go. I will mention just a few indications of that.

For the last fourteen years I have had the privilege

of being involved in training people for ministry. There is absolutely no shortage of vocations in Ireland. Each year, many men and women, lay and religious, full of gifts and life experience, respond to their baptismal call and embark on training programmes at some considerable personal cost. They are filled with a generosity of spirit and a burning desire to share in the mission of the Church.

Excited by the possibilities for ministry, they return to their communities. More often than not, however, they are deeply disillusioned when they find their gifts and training are not welcomed. It is hard to pinpoint who or what stands in the way, but caught in a web of systemic institutional forces the energy that is of the Holy Spirit is trapped and dissipates in human frustration.

I experienced a very tangible and painful expression of this disillusionment at a workshop on ministry held in Maynooth in early summer 2007. This gathering was organised at the request of the Bishops' Conference by the Commission for Clergy, Seminaries and Permanent Diaconate and the Commission for Pastoral Renewal and Adult Faith Development. Many people – lay, religious and ordained – who are engaged in ministry in parishes and communities all over Ireland gathered. There were various presentations on ministry and the document, *The Permanent Diaconate: National Directory and Norms for Ireland*, was presented.¹¹

In the group work and discussion that followed the overwhelming sense was one of frustration. While people did not object to the permanent diaconate *per se*, they felt it was not the direction to go in Ireland just now. The general feeling was that permanent diaconate was being introduced without any discussion with the whole People of God. This was experienced as a denial of the reality on the ground that so many are willing to take their place in an integrated approach to ministry. This response was politely listened to – but the diaconate has been introduced.

Genuine collaborative ministry is really difficult and I am conscious it is asking of the clerical members of the Church a way of being together in ministry for which they have not been trained. But it is essential this issue be tackled immediately.

Conclusion

The truth revealed by all the reports on abuse in

the Catholic Church is that we have failed miserably in our relationships and as a consequence there has been enormous suffering and damage. Together, we need to use our gifts and expertise to bring healing and reconciliation in relation to our past in whatever way we can.

But I believe the real challenge emerging from the various reports is about the present. As I have argued throughout this reflection, the use of power and the style of relationships within the Church in Ireland were major factors in allowing abuse to happen and go unchallenged. These reports must be a catalyst for us to come together to commit ourselves as the whole People of God to be a true sign of God's life and an instrument at the service of that relational reality. It is only then we can begin to preach the Good News with integrity.

Notes

1. Marie Keenan, "Them and Us": The Clergy Child Sexual Offender as 'Other', in Tony Flannery (ed.), *Responding to The Ryan Report*, Dublin: Columba Press, 2009.
2. John Waters, 'In Denial Then, In Denial Now', *The Tablet*, 30 May 2009.
3. Joe O'Riordan, 'A Young Person Reflects on the Ryan Report', in Tony Flannery (ed.), *op. cit.*
4. Marie Keenan, *op. cit.*, p. 220.
5. Sean Fagan, 'The Abuse and Our Bad Theology', in Tony Flannery (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 14–24.
6. Margaret Lee, 'Searching for Reasons: A Former Sister of Mercy Looks Back', in Tony Flannery (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 44–54.
7. John Waters, *op. cit.*; Mary Condren, 'Clerics Dodge Responsibility to Claim Moral High Ground', *The Irish Times*, 12 June 2009.
8. Daire Keogh, 'Peter Tyrell, Letterfrack and the Ryan Report', in Tony Flannery (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 56–81.
9. *Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, Promulgated by Pope Paul VI, 21 November 1964, in Walter M. Abbott SJ (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966.
10. Brendan Leahy, 'People, Synod and Upper Room: Vatican II's Ecclesiology of Communion', p. 49 in Dermot Lane and Brendan Leahy (eds.), *Vatican II: Facing the 21st Century – Historical and Theological Perspectives*, Dublin: Veritas, 2006.
11. *The Permanent Diaconate: National Directory and Norms for Ireland*, Dublin: Veritas, 2006.

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