Catholicism is being damaged by clericalist desire for power

Lay people need to be involved in implementing the Pope’s charge to the Irish bishops to rebuild confidence in the Church following the sex abuse scandals, writes Sean O’Conaill, who argues that clericalism is the enemy of Catholicism.

I HAVE come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10)

This was the text that Pope Benedict XVI recommended to the Irish bishops on October 28 to counter the view that Catholicism is merely “a collection of prohibitions”.

Clearly the Pope’s central concern – to reverse the tide of an anti-Christian and anti-Catholic secularisation that has gripped the West generally – is now as relevant to Ireland as to any other western country.

And this is a task for Irish lay people as well.

Many of us know through bitter experience the emptiness of the promise of happiness without faith. I have read such obituaries of the faith these laity can know and feel. Many of us have found at the centre of our faith an intense joy: the reality of a God who comes to meet us in times of need, the promise of eternal life, and speaks to us of his unconditional love and respect.

But we are not encountered good priests, most of us could not have discovered that life-giving, life-enhancing truth.

It is important to state that conviction at the same time that we face up to the other challenges that are emphasised, in relation to the scourge of clerical child sexual abuse. “To rebuild confidence and trust where these have been damaged... to establish the truth of what happened in the past, to take whatever steps are necessary to prevent it from occurring again, to ensure that the principles of justice are fully respected and, above all, to bring healing to the victims and to all those affected by these egregious crimes.”

Was the Voice of the Faithful know well the challenge involved here. Because we have spoken out strongly against negative aspects of “Church culture”, people are coming to us in increasing numbers with their own stories of pain suffered at the hands of a more dysfunctional Catholicism in the recent past.

These are not stories of sexual abuse but, all too often, of social and physical abuse. People complain of lingering queries about class room at their origins in orphanages or in urban areas of deep poverty and unemployment – by clerics who had apparently forgotten that their Lord had been born in a stable.

Some speak of clerical bullying to the point of constructive dismissal from Church-related careers. Some complain too of serious physical abuse that would have put their perpetrators before the courts of today, on charges of common assault.

This is the paradox: the Church that I and many others have experienced as a Church of welcome, a place of safety, of inspiration and of truth has been experienced by too many others as a Church of put-downs, of intimidation, of abuse and of shame.

Thinking hard about this, we believe that the time has come for all of us, our bishops included, to do exactly what the Pope has asked us to do: identify the source of all of these sufferings, not in Catholicism, but in something else that we now need to abandon forever: Catholic clericalism.

Clericalism is the belief that, despite what St Peter and St Paul both said, God does indeed have favourites: those who have received the gift of ordination. Most priests understand that along with this gift of ordination comes the most solemn obligation: to think of the challenged dignity of so many others.

CONCERN: Pope Benedict XVI has urged bishops to counter the view that Catholicism is merely ‘a collection of prohibitions’.

“A PUBLIC lecture on peace and justice will be given by Professor Brendan Leahy at Edghill College in Belfast on Monday. The lecture is under the auspices of Exploring Theology Together, an initiative of Edghill - the Methodist Church’s training college - and Mater Dei Institute in Dublin.

Prof Leahy, the Professor of Systematic Theology at St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, will be speaking about ‘No peace without justice: no justice without forgiveness’.

He was formerly a member of staff at Mater Dei Institute and was one of the lecturers on the Exploring Theology Together course at Edghill College. All are welcome to the lecture at Edghill College, in Lennoxvale off Malone Road, at 7.30pm on Monday.

A ROBST, constructive discussion is promised in Derry on Monday at a debate organised jointly by the Church of Ireland

and a community group. The subject at the ‘Beyond the Box’, the discussion - organised by the Church’s Hard Gospel Project and The Junction - is ‘Where is there no vision - leadership in the Protestant/unionist community’.”

Liam Clarke, the Northern Ireland editor of The Sunday Times, and PUP leader David Ervine will be the debate’s guest speakers.

In a joint statement Reverend Earl Storey of the Hard Gospel Project and Audrey Guichon of The Junction, he said: “The success of these events does not lie in whether you agree with the speakers.

The purpose is to provide a space for discussion of difficult issues that directly affect our community. It is an opportunity to talk about difficult issues in a public way.”

The discussion will take place at The Junction, Bishop Street, Derry at 10.30am on Monday. For more information contact 028 7136 1942.