



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 secularism in 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. 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 the deepest challenge, and speaks to us of his unconditional love and respect.

Had we 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 that other challenge the Pope 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.”

We in 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 stories not just of sexual abuse but, all too often, of social and physical abuse. People complain of finger-pointing in the classroom 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



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

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, 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

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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.

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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 not of themselves and of their own dignity but of the challenged dignity of so many others.

They understand that it is through our baptism and confirmation that we receive our most important titles: that of brother or sister of Christ, of temple of the Holy Spirit, and of son or daughter of the Father.

They take to heart the advice that Jesus gives to all who are invited to a feast – to take the lowliest place. They understand, in short, that the Christian call is, above all, a call to humility. In so doing they raise us lay people up to an understanding of our own dignity.

Historically Catholic clericalism is something entirely different.

It is a presumption of superiority, a presumption of entitlement to the submission and deference of the non-ordained.

Clericalism is not the gift of ordination but the gift of the world.

The clericalist cleric has joined the church not to serve the poor but to be socially pre-eminant.

Entering the seminary in search of a career he has allowed the spirituality of the Gospels to touch him as fleetingly as water slipping off the back of a duck. Attracted not to the mysterious servant Church, he has been attracted all along to the Church of power and of status – and expects these as his due.

Clericalism lies at the root of all of the disasters the Church in Ireland has suffered in recent years. It explains why so many paedophiles

joined the clergy to begin with: to exploit the vulnerability and submissiveness of Catholic children and their families. It explains also why too many bishops covered up this foul pestilence: to protect the supposedly sinless status of clergy.

And it also explains why so many Irish people are flocking these days to the cause of secularism.

Because bishops have covered up the abuse it has been left to secular

institutions – police, courts, media – to reveal the truth and to bring what closure the victims of this abuse have so far experienced.

But the apostles of secularism need to notice exactly what our bishops need to notice.

Power without accountability becomes corrupt because of our human tendency to sin.

And accountability – the principle that power must always be ready to explain itself – is a deeply biblical, not a secular, concept. From Genesis to the Gospels, God calls us to account for our behaviour, especially when it is used abusively.

It is therefore not dangerous but deeply healing to call for structures of accountability within our Catholic Church also.

Without internal accountability on administrative matters (not matters of doctrine) Catholicism will remain forever prone to external accountability – media scandal – because sooner or later unaccountable power is always abused.

We in Voice of the Faithful therefore recommend our programme as a necessary part of the answer to the Pope's challenge to the Irish Church: to heal victims, to vindicate good priests and to enable priests and people to rebind ourselves – “through structures established for that purpose” – to the cause of saving our society from a secularism that wants to cut itself adrift from the spiritual origins of all that is best in our civilisation.

■ **Sean O'Conaill is the acting co-ordinator for Voice of the Faithful Ireland (VOTF) (www.votfi.com). VOTF, which started in the United States, says its mission is “To provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the faithful can actively participate in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church”.**

It says its goals are: “To support survivors of clergy sexual abuse”; “to support priests of integrity”; and “to shape structural change

SERMON NOTES

■ A PUBLIC lecture on peace and justice will be given by Professor Brendan Leahy at Edgehill College in Belfast on Monday. The lecture is under the auspices of Exploring Theology Together, an initiative of Edgehill – 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 Edgehill College. All are welcome to the lecture at Edgehill College, in Lennoxvale off Malone Road, at 7.30pm on Monday.

■ A ROBUST, 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 there is 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 keynote speakers. In a joint statement Reverend Earl Storey of the Hard Gospel Project and Audrey Guichon of The Junction said: “The success of these events does not lie in whether or not you agree with the speakers. The purpose is to provide a forum for public discussion of difficult issues that directly affect our community. It is an opportunity to grapple with 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.