

# An illusion of power and majesty...but a weak intellectual and moral core

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**The sad truth is that a very large chunk of the blame for the collapse of Catholic Ireland must be placed squarely at the doorstep of the Church, writes David Thunder**

When a third of the population poured into the Phoenix Park on September 29, 1979 to celebrate Mass with Pope John Paul II, Ireland was – by all accounts – a vibrantly Catholic country. It was a country that paid homage to the traditional two-parent family, attended weekly Mass, happily entrusted the education and care of its citizens to the Church, hugely respected religious orders and ‘men of the cloth’.

It also considered abortion an unspeakable crime against human life and would have been completely flummoxed by ideas such as same-sex marriage and transgender identity.

Of course, this description would not capture the attitudes of all Irish citizens who lived in 1979. However, these sorts of attitudes were fully in-line with the zeitgeist of 1970s Ireland, and were echoed by many respected political leaders and journalists. Indeed, the 1979 papal visit seemed to be an exuberant celebration of Ireland’s proudly Catholic identity.

The image of Ireland transmitted by RTÉ’s coverage of the 1979 visit was that of an unassailable fortress of Catholic values and practices.

But as the saying goes, all that glitters is not gold. Who could have predicted that children learning to babble their first words during that exciting papal visit were to see the basic narrative of ‘Catholic Ireland’ begin to unravel before their very eyes by their 20th birthday, and recede into a misty past by their 40th? The most dramatic unravelling was to occur in the two decades between the conviction of Brendan Smyth in 1997 for a sordid history of sexual abuse of minors, and the passage of the same-sex marriage and abortion referendums in 2015 and 2018.

## **Credibility**

Between 1997 and 2018, the credibility of the Catholic Church in Ireland was decimated by waves of revelations of sexual abuse of minors by clerics, disgraceful coverups of such abuse by bishops, and the abuse and mistreatment of children under the care of religious congregations recounted in painful detail in various reports of public inquiries, including the 2005 Ferns report and the 2009 Ryan report.

Parallel to the clerical and religious abuse scandals, we saw Irish public opinion swing dramatically in a liberal-progressive direction between 1997 and 2018, with same-sex marriage and highly permissive abortion laws being ushered in by comfortable majorities. Meanwhile, religious practice was in freefall, with many churches virtually abandoned by the younger generations; while the tone of the public culture became increasingly hostile toward 'conservative Catholics', who were widely sneered at as clinging to 'backward' views that were simply 'out of touch' with the demands of 'modern Ireland'.

Those of us who have decided to hold the course and stay in the Catholic Church now face a bleak panorama: a Church shaken to its very foundations by high-level abuse that came at the unthinkable price of the innocence of children; and a national culture not only diverging de facto from the Catholic vision of the common good, but ever more impatient and hostile toward anyone who would dare to publicly dissent from the conventional wisdom of liberal-progressive Ireland.

A Catholic opposed to the ongoing cultural revolution might well be inclined to go on the defensive. He or she might point out, for example, that the Church abuses were perpetrated by a minority of clerics and religious, and a tiny minority of the faithful.

Or one might argue that this cultural revolution was not populist in its origins, but the fruits of a relatively small cabal of intelligent and savvy politicians, journalists and activists, who used their story-telling wiles to pull the wool over the eyes of a naïve and impressionable public.

While there may be something to be said for both of these arguments, neither can justify Catholics in adopting a fundamentally defensive or self-excusing posture in the face of the dramatic decline in Ireland's Catholic culture. Just as one would be foolish to believe that the Roman Empire fell purely because of the machinations of an external enemy, one would be extremely naïve to think that Catholic Ireland collapsed because she was taken in by a handful of progressive-liberal campaigners and journalists.

The truth is much more painful than that, at least for those of us who still throw in our lot with the Catholic Church, who still maintain that somehow, in spite of its fallenness, it remains God's chosen instrument of salvation.

The sad truth is that a very large chunk of the blame for the collapse of Catholic Ireland must be placed squarely at the doorstep of Catholic Ireland herself.

That this is so becomes clear if we review the sociological context within which Catholic Ireland imploded. In 2016, at the height of Ireland's liberal-progressive cultural revolution, those who self-identified as 'Catholic' in the Republic were not a small rump of the population of a bygone era, but 78% – nearly four in five Irish people.

How are we to explain the fact that a country boasting nearly 80% baptised Catholics would:

-see a dramatic fall-off in weekly Mass-goers;

-vote by a comfortable majority to put same-sex marriage on the same footing as heterosexual marriage (thereby clearing the way for gay adoption); and

-vote by a two to one majority for repeal of the right to life of the unborn?

Above all, how do we explain the fact that nearly one in three repeal voters attended Mass at least monthly, and nearly one in six counted themselves as weekly Mass-goers, according to RTÉ exit polls, carried out during last year's abortion referendum?

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The key to understanding the cultural revolution that dealt such a lethal blow to Catholic values in Ireland is not to be found primarily in secular or progressive Ireland, but in the bowels of Catholic Ireland herself. It was longstanding vulnerabilities in Ireland's native Catholic culture, already present long before the 1979 papal visit, that paved the way for the subsequent collapse in religious practice and the decline of a range of core Christian – and human – values such as marriage, family life, and the sacredness of human life.

The first and most tragic of these vulnerabilities, hidden from view for so many decades, was the behaviour of a small but significant minority of Catholic priests and members of religious orders.

Their unscrupulous sexual abuse and neglect of minors in their care constituted an egregious violation of the sacred trust that had been placed in them by their flocks, and by the people of Ireland more generally. And if the revelation of this betrayal was not enough to smash the public credibility of the Church, it was made even worse by the repeated cover-ups down the years by high-level Church leaders.

### **Deposit**

Secondly, Irish Catholics, laity and priests alike, have nobody to blame but themselves for failing to transmit the deposit of the Faith intact to present generations, for effectively hollowing out their own Catholic culture, to the point where its collapse became virtually inescapable. Indeed, it would appear that the practice of the externals of the Faith became so divorced from education in the values of the Faith, that churches gradually became reconciled with having 'warm bodies' at weekly Mass without bringing them into contact with the essentials of the Faith, or helping them incorporate the moral principles that Christ taught into their daily lives.

While authentic religious piety and devotion were never stamped out in Ireland, it certainly seems probable that the neglect of basic aspects of moral and religious education, whether by half-hearted religion teachers, complacent parish priests, or parents who thought it was the Church's job, not theirs, to pass on the Faith – led to growing numbers of the faithful showing up at weekly Mass as was the custom – perhaps even at that memorable papal Mass of 1979 – but with little notion of why they were there, or what it had to do with the rest of their lives.

If the faithful looked to their Church leaders for moral and spiritual nourishment and instruction, they were often disappointed. For many priests and bishops inherited and passed on a Church culture that had become intellectually and morally complacent, stale, and conformist, riding the waves of its inherited prestige, and buoyed up by a laity unaccustomed to asking difficult questions, and a friendly State and media establishment.

So Irish Catholicism chugged along for much of the 20th Century with the illusion of power and majesty but a weak intellectual and moral core.

### **Lightweight**

An intellectually light-weight and heavily clerical Church was caught off-guard by the barrage of attacks by anti-Catholic journalists who burst onto the scene in the 1980s and 1990s. Ironically, many of these journalists had developed their anti-Catholic opinions in Catholic schools that probably had little patience for serious intellectual inquiry.

While Catholics were fed on a staple diet of anti-Catholic diatribes in newspapers, on the airwaves, and eventually, in social media, many of them lacked the confidence to stand their ground. Because they no longer knew what it was that they stood for – if they ever had.

Public apologetics, then, was left largely up to the hierarchy, who had neither the intellectual preparation nor – once the abuse scandals had broken – the moral credibility to effectively defend the Faith and morals of Catholic Ireland that were now mercilessly under assault.

Had ordinary Catholics managed to assimilate the message of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), they might have taken personal responsibility for developing a robust Catholic culture and handing it on to future generations, with or without strong clerical support. But Catholic

Ireland seemed to be trapped in an extremely clerical ecclesiology, insensible to the notion of lay initiative or responsibility.

Indeed, clericalism was so pervasive in Ireland prior to the exposure of clerical abuse that many parish priests, for much of the 20th Century, 'could do no wrong' and were put up on a pedestal by their parishioners.

This blind clericalism made lay Catholics less vigilant than they might have otherwise been in the face of clerical abuse, and is probably part of the reason why the Irish faithful left their churches in droves in the wake of the clerical abuses.

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To sum up, Catholic Ireland herself was the instrument of her own downfall, even if she had more than a little help from an increasingly consumerist and hedonistic culture, and fashionable liberal ideologies which made individual choices almost unassailable and individual conscience the litmus test of morality.

What some will interpret as the implosion of a quaint or outdated Catholic culture, others will view as a colossal tragedy for modern Ireland. For it may be argued that Christian values such as solidarity, human dignity, the complementarity of male and female role models in the home, and the spirit of humble service, are vital pillars of our civilisation, which tend to languish in a culture that has lost its Christian bearings.

Indeed, a strong case can be made that the implosion of Ireland's Catholic culture is likely to visit untold harm on the wider society, as family bonds become weakened, growing numbers of children grow up without a father or a mother, infants' lives are snuffed out prematurely, and many parents must, sooner or later, come to terms with complicity in the death of their own offspring.

While more intelligent public apologetics and public relations may be necessary to recover some of the ground Catholics have lost in Ireland, the first priority of Irish Catholics at the present juncture should be to take the full measure of the sins and failures of Ireland's Catholic Church, priests and laity alike, that have paved the way for the upending of marriage and family life, the legally and medically sanctioned destruction of life in the womb, and the sharp decline in religious practice across the country.

Among the failures, sins, and vulnerabilities of Catholic Ireland that deserve special mention, we might include the culture of promiscuity and predation associated with clerical abuse and coverup, the anti-intellectualism of many Catholic educators, the shallow conformism lurking beneath much popular piety, the culture of clericalism that emasculated the role of the laity, and the failure of Church leaders to teach with clarity and lead by example in times of great moral confusion.

Catholic Ireland should examine her conscience, and weep.

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