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Sexual Abuse and the Irish Church:
Crisis and Responses

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Sexual Abuse and the Irish Church: Crisis and Responses

Synopsis

The authors recount the history of the sexual abuse crisis that emerged in the Irish church during the 1990's and the range of responses to it.

About the Authors

Robert Savage is Associate Director of the Boston College Irish Studies Program. His current research focuses on the development of the electronic media in Ireland in the 1960's. This work explores the first decade of Irish television investigating the development of a native news service and the controversies surrounding the broadcasting of Irish and foreign produced programming. He is the author of many books and articles, including *Ireland in the new century: Politics, Culture and Identity*, Four Courts Press (2002)

James Smith teaches Irish literature and culture from the seventeenth century through the contemporary period. He is especially interested in cultural studies. He has published articles on Ben Jonson's *Irish Masque at Court* and on contemporary Irish narrative. He is currently working on a book project examining the representation of institutional care in contemporary Irish culture.

After the Irish famine, the Catholic Church emerged as a powerful force in Ireland and it has continued to exert tremendous influence in Irish politics and society. In the early years of the Irish Free State, governments were at pains to prove their loyalty and commitment to the Catholic hierarchy. In 1930 the Irish government established diplomatic relations with the Vatican, and in elections President W.T. Cosgrave made much of his government's close relationship with the church. Following a change in governments in 1932, Eamon de Valera, the head of the new Fianna Fail government, publicly declared his intention to govern "in accordance with the principles enunciated in the encyclicals of Pope Pius XI on the Social Order." Later in the decade, he shared drafts of the 1937 Constitution with the Catholic hierarchy, ensuring that the finished document fully embraced Catholic social teaching. The constitution recognized the "special position" of the Catholic Church in Irish Society, stopping just short of declaring Catholicism a 'National' religion. Unlike the separation of powers in the United States, Church and State were inextricably linked in Ireland throughout the twentieth century.

Nowhere was this bond more in evidence than in matters of public morality and social welfare. In fact, the state ceded huge areas of social policy to the care of Catholic religious orders. The majority of Ireland's hospitals, schools, asylums, orphanages, and welfare agencies reported directly to the State and indirectly to members of the hierarchy. The power of the Church in these matters was such that in the early 1950s, Dublin's Archbishop John Charles McQuaid helped undermine a coalition government that dared to enact health legislation providing pre and post-natal care for mothers and children without the consent and approval of the church. The so-called "Mother and Child" bill infringed on what the Church saw as its legitimate remit, and the hierarchy would countenance no such breach of its powers. As recently as the mid-1980s, the Catholic hierarchy wielded enough power to publicly intervene in the constitutional referenda addressing the constitutional ban on abortion and the introduction of divorce legislation. But during the late 1980s and early 1990s the Church's ability to sway public debate on moral and socio-sexual matters declined: contraception was made freely available, homosexuality was decriminalized, and divorce was legally provided for in 1995.

While Church influence in Irish society receded in the 1990's, allegations of church collusion in covering up numerous sexual scandals emerged. Since 1992 the church in Ireland has been beset by scandals that reveal an historic and systemic impulse on the part of the hierarchy to prevent embarrassing controversy regardless of the cost in terms of victims' pain and suffering. This seeming moral contradiction underscores the Irish public's disillusion with a religious institution once regarded as all-powerful and untouchable. Many locate the origins of this crisis in the public revelations regarding a much loved and highly respected leader of the Irish hierarchy, Bishop Eamon Casey of Galway. In 1992, the media exposed the fact that he had fathered a son some eighteen years earlier and abandoned both mother and child for years. To make matters worse it became clear that he had used church funds to buy their silence. For many in Ireland, Casey was the charismatic and progressive figure in the Irish hierarchy, frequently speaking out on a broad range of issues from poverty at home to American military intervention in Latin America. The scandal received renewed momentum a short time later when it was revealed that Fr. Michael Cleary, known to many as Ireland's singing priest, had fathered two children with his housekeeper who had sought his help years earlier as a homeless girl. The young 17 year old woman — an incest survivor who had spent many years in Irish orphanages and previously resided in a psychiatric hospital — turned to Cleary for help. In return, she lived a life of physical and emotional abuse including being forced by the very popular Cleary to give their first child up for adoption. The fundamental moral contradiction embodied by the Casey and Cleary affairs left many in Irish congregations questioning for the first time the gap between preaching and practice.

The scandal, however, was still in its infancy. The aforementioned revelations were dwarfed by emerging revelations regarding widespread sexual abuse of children in the care of Ireland's Catholic clergy. One of the most sensational cases involved Fr. Brendan Smyth, a pedophile priest, who was wanted in Northern

Ireland on charges of sexually abusing seventeen young children. Smyth hid out in a monastery in the Irish Republic, refusing to return to Northern Ireland to answer for his crimes. Ireland's Attorney General, himself a member of a very conservative Catholic organization, ignored the extradition order and this resulted in the collapse of Albert Reynolds's government in 1995.(Albert Reynolds had been a critical force behind the peace process which three years later resulted in the landmark Good Friday Agreement.) Many in Ireland thought it inconceivable that the State would collude in protecting a pederast priest. Further revelations focused on efforts of parts of the hierarchy to finance out-of-court settlements to maintain secrecy in civil cases taken against abusive priests. It seemed that cases were cropping up in every Irish diocese (e.g. Fr. Ivan Payne and Fr. Patrick Hughes in Dublin, Fr. Daniel Curran in Antrim, Fr. Micheal Donovan in Galway). But the diocese of Ferns remained at the very center of this scandal. Fr. Sean Fortune, who committed suicide in 1999 shortly before standing trial on dozens of charges that he had abused young boys, became the face of this increasingly public crisis. In April of 2002, Pope John Paul II accepted the resignation of Brendan Comiskey, Bishop of Ferns, for his mishandling of years of complaints about Fr. Fortune. Comiskey had stated earlier that "Fortune was out of control and there was nothing I could do." Reflecting on the impact of ongoing child sex abuse scandals on the Church, Willie Walsh, Bishop of Killaloe, announced to the National Conference of Priests in 1996 that the sexual scandals involving clergy and religious have 'shattered' the Catholic church in Ireland and that there was a 'perception that we, as bishops, and other religious authorities involved ourselves in a web of secrecy which was designed to protect the abuser rather than the abused.'

Sadly, revelations regarding clerical pedophilia involving individual children at the diocesan and parish level capture only half the Irish story. The other half of the story involves the systematic physical, emotional and sexual abuse of women and children in the care of Irish religious at various church-run institutions. These include the thousands of children the state incarcerated in Ireland's industrial and reformatory school system. Up until 1970, there were anywhere from 2000 to 5000 such children during any given year. Many more children, especially those who were physically or mentally challenged, were sent to religious-run residential hospitals. Thousands more were farmed out as cheap labor to local farmers. Similarly, thousands of Irish women were confined against their will in Ireland's Magdalen asylums because they were single mothers, had been raped or otherwise sexually interfered with, or were deemed in danger of being sexually active. Far too often the very people in charge of these institutions, members of various religious orders including the Christian Brothers, the Sisters of Mercy, the Good Shepherds and many others, took advantage of their position of power to sexually abuse the young people in their care. It became clear that a wide range of children in various church-run homes, and more recently

juvenile delinquent and so-called ‘problem’ children in residential homes, suffered repeated abuse at the hands of priests and nuns. Throughout the 1990s, a series of important television programs-- *States of Fear*, *Dear Daughter*, *Washing Away the Stain*, *Witness: Sex in a Cold Climate* and *Sinners*-- helped focus public attention on clerical abuse in Ireland. They gave voice to adult-survivors who provided testimony of their experiences, they documented Church and State collusion in the operation of these institutions, and they underscored the climate of secrecy and denial that permeated the church response when faced with controversial accusations. US media outlets, including CBS’s *60 Minutes* and ABC’s *20/20*, followed up on these Irish and British programs and produced segments for an Irish-American audience on Irish orphanages, Magdalen asylums, and Irish adoption practices. These shows helped disseminate word of the scandal beyond national boundaries, and in the process spoke to victims of abuse amongst Ireland’s Diaspora.

Responses to the ongoing scandal came from both government and church. On May 11, 1999, speaking before the Irish parliament, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern announced a comprehensive program of response to the controversy. At the core of Ahern’s speech was the first official apology to victims of abuse suffered while they were institutionalized as part of the nation’s childcare system. The Taoiseach asked for forgiveness: “On behalf of the State and of all citizens of the State, the Government wishes to make a sincere and long overdue apology to the victims of childhood abuse for our collective failure to intervene, to detect their pain, to come to their rescue.” For the many thousands of survivors of Ireland’s industrial and reformatory schools, many of whom are still living with the scars of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, the government’s apology represented a crucial validation of their childhood experience and an acknowledgement of the wrongs that were done to them. But, this apology and the attending package of legislative measure, also conveniently deflected attention away from politicians and squarely focused attention onto the Catholic Church, its erstwhile partner in moral and social issues for much of the twentieth century. That said, the State did deliver on its promise of legislative reform and in April 2000, the Irish Government enacted the “Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Act, 2000” and outlined three primary functions:

- a. to listen to victims of childhood abuse who want to recount their experience to a sympathetic forum
- b. to fully investigate all allegations of abuse made to it
- c. to publish a report on its findings to the general public

The Church’s response has been somewhat more eclectic. To date, the Christian Brothers, The Mercy Sisters and CORI (The Conference of Religious of Ireland) have offered public apologies to the adult survivors of physical and sexual abuse by members of their orders. In June 2001, the Irish Hierarchy

established the Hussey Commission to investigate how complaints about clerical abuse of minors have been handled over the last three decades. Similarly investigations into the handling of clerical abuse allegations in the diocese of Ferns and at Ireland's national seminary, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth continue. In February 2002, some 18 religious orders agreed to provide more than 128 million Euros (approximately \$128 million) in compensation to the victims of childhood abuse. Most of the money was raised from church property transfers to the State. As recently as October 2002, another television documentary on Ireland's national broadcasting station, *Primetime: Cardinal Secrets*, refocused attention on Dublin's Cardinal Desmond Connell charging him with gross-mishandling of the sex abuse scandal and accusing him of participating in a deliberate cover-up of facts. As of October 2000 [the last date for which figures are available from the Catholic Communications office] a total of 48 clergy has been convicted in Ireland of child sex abuse, covering a 17 year period from 1983 to 2000. Currently, there are 450 legal actions pending in the Dublin Archdiocese as a result of child sex abuse — 150 of them from clerical abuse and an estimated 300 from abuse in industrial schools. (Dublin is one of four Archdioceses in Ireland.) One final statistic suggests the impact that the scandals may have had on the Irish church. In 2001, 30 young men entered seminaries in Ireland as compared to 164 in 1970. The Archdiocese of Dublin plans on ordaining 1 priest this year.

For further reading

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