Between Traditionalism and Tradition

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IN 2011, ironically on the feast of the Annunciation, the Belfast-based newspaper, *The Irish News*, published an article announcing the imminent end of the Catholic Church in Ireland. It was reporting the findings of a research project carried out in the United States of America into the future of religion in various countries, including Ireland. Using mathematical models of probability, and analysing certain sociological data, a group of American academics had predicted the gradual disappearance of religion in the following countries: Australia, Austria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Switzerland, in alphabetical order.

This American research seemed to suggest that, if declining religious institutions finally became extinct, religious faith itself would not find new forms of expression. In short, when organized religions had died, there would be only a secular city left, with little nostalgia for humanity's religious heritage.

Without wishing to indulge in such hypotheses, this article seeks nonetheless to examine the dire situation in which the Catholic Church now finds itself in Ireland, and to explain an even more pessimistic assessment that some have made: that this institution cannot be said to be facing extinction, since it has already long been spiritually extinct.

The basis of this interpretation of recent Irish history is the claim that the Irish sacrificed their native language (Irish Gaelic) in the course of the nineteenth century, and adopted the language (English) of their imperial neighbours and masters, in order to improve their chances of survival and advancement in a world where a lack of knowledge of English was an increasingly disastrous liability – legally,

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socially, economically and hence politically. Then in the latter part of the twentieth century, the Irish proceeded to sacrifice their religion, in a continued pursuit not just of survival, but of success, since religion was perceived pragmatically as of questionable value in everyday life.

In this perspective, the end of Irish Catholic Christianity began, paradoxically, with Catholic Emancipation, a process that culminated in the British Parliament's passing of the Catholic Relief Act of 1829, which removed most of the serious constraints that had been imposed on Catholics within the United Kingdom over the preceding few centuries (a period in which the United Kingdom included the entire island of Ireland). While it is certainly possible to contest this point of view as being unduly harsh to a proud tradition, the context brings to mind the distinction made by the late Church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan: 'Tradition is the living

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faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.'[1] For it can be argued that, over recent centuries, 'traditionalism' has been a more potent force in Catholic life in Ireland than 'tradition'. The 'living faith of the dead,' or 'the faith of our fathers,' can still give life, and continues to do so at a practical level in countless human lives in Ireland. But for all too many Irish Catholics, the public face of their faith has come to resemble a death-mask, no longer capable of registering awareness of a new age or radiating a vital connection with truth.

Not everyone will share this point of view. However, the fact that this opinion is widely shared does raise an obvious question: how did such a situation come about in such a relatively short space of time, in such a traditionally Catholic country as Ireland? Part of the reason, no doubt, lies in the changes attendant upon the rise of modernity. The accumulated impact of cultural changes, which continental Europe has had a few centuries to try to absorb, overtook Ireland in a relatively short space of time. Having not fully experienced, at the time, the intellectually disruptive effects of the continental Reformation and Enlightenment, when they initially occurred, Ireland was more

1. *The Vindication of Tradition: 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities* (source: http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/show/78936)

or less defenceless when the forces of modernity began to cast their secularizing, disenchanting spell over the country in general, and over the Catholic Church in particular, in the latter part of the twentieth century. In other words, even without the recent spate of scandals that have shaken Catholicism throughout the world, it would still have been under serious pressure in Ireland in the late twentieth century.

THE ENGLISH CONNECTION

Another part of the explanation for the current malaise in Ireland may also be more specific. For it is difficult not to see a link between the development of Catholicism in Ireland and the latter's relationship with its nearest neighbour, England. England's theoretical grip on Ireland, which had existed from Norman times (beginning in the twelfth century), became much more practically evident in the two turbulent centuries following the Reformation. Indubitably, a majority of the island's inhabitants regarded English governance since the Reformation as profoundly alien. While Protestant Ireland, with the significant exception of Presbyterians at times, felt generally comfortable with the English connection, Catholic Ireland mostly did not. Its fundamental perception of Protestant England as an invading, 'foreign', controlling, discriminating factor in Irish life was daily reaffirmed by the civil disadvantages, both serious and petty, imposed on Catholics by the English Crown. This perception in turn created, in the minds of the Catholic Irish, an emotional or psychological vacuum in terms of public allegiance to, or identity with, the established power and authority of the state.

And it was into this vacuum that the Catholic Church seems to have stepped, naturally and indeed enthusiastically, once Catholic Emancipation was granted in 1829.

Though there was an inevitable gain of power and prestige by the Catholic clergy, especially the higher clergy, it would be simplistic to speak of the Irish Catholic laity as having had this situation imposed from above by a tyrannical clergy. For there was an unspoken connivance on the part of the laity with the new-found power of the Catholic clergy: the laity could share in the power of the clergy, as it were by proxy, over against the Protestant 'powers that be' in the land. In

practical terms, this meant that if the Protestant landowner had a 'big house,' the Catholic bishop had his palace, while the Catholic parish priest would have the best house in the parish, putting him on a par with the local Protestant minister. In the twentieth century, in addition, Irish Catholics took pride in the missionary movements emerging from Ireland, which led to the building up of a kind of 'spiritual empire overseas', which further reinforced the sense of Ireland's importance and power on the world stage. It was a far cry from the days when the native Irish were threatened with extinction in their own land.

Now, it would certainly be a caricature to say that Catholic bishops in Ireland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries enjoyed absolute power. But events seem to have proved that they enjoyed more power than was good either for them or for the Gospel that it was their vocation to proclaim. Here almost inevitably one thinks of Lord Acton's adage that power tends to corrupt, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

SURVIVAL

It would, however, also be probably true to say that the fear of near-extinction was deeply ingrained in Irish Catholicism after the disasters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the native Catholic population was brutalized, driven to the poorest parts of the country, and forced to eke out an existence, as serfs practically, on land owned by people perceived as 'foreigners' or 'outsiders'. This fear in turn may have largely contributed to an attitude on the part of Irish Catholic bishops, in recent centuries, that seemed focused on survival and consolidation. In other words, never again was the possibility of near-extinction to be allowed to recur.

And, furthermore, since with what is termed the 'Flight of the Earls' in 1607 the most powerful of the Catholic Irish aristocracy had fled to continental Europe, never to return, in an ultimately fruitless quest to gain support for a future 'reconquest' of their lands, the Catholic Church was *de facto* the native population's only 'institution' available to try to ensure that the nightmare of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would not be revisited on the country.

Hence, the creation of a laity capable of holding commanding

positions in society became a vital aim of the Catholic Church, led by its bishops, as they battled to control the transition, from the time of Catholic Emancipation onwards, from survival to development and consolidation.

EDUCATION

In this context, education naturally became an important issue, and the control of education equally so. But this was not education understood as an exploration of the meaning of life, or as a primary means of enhancing human existence: such a luxury was instinctively spurned as a distraction from the more urgent need to use the school as an instrument in the struggle for survival. Education was thus implicitly understood as a means to acquiring social, economic and ultimately political influence and status. This attitude can only have been reinforced by the experience of the next disaster to befall the native Irish in the shape of the Great Famine in the middle of the nineteenth century.

One example of this attitude is the Irish bishops' reaction to John Henry Newman's arrival in Ireland in the nineteenth century, just after the Great Famine, with idealistic plans for establishing a Catholic University, where the life of the mind would be cultivated, almost for its own sake. Though it was the bishops who had invited him, they gave him at best a fool's pardon, and at worst the cold shoulder. Newman's foundation still exists and prospers, in the shape of University College Dublin (UCD), but his dream was never realized.

To try to understand the context in which Catholicism became a significant political force in nineteenth-century Ireland, is by no means to play down the shortcomings of Catholic leadership in recent centuries. It is not a question of 'to understand everything is to forgive everything' ('*tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*'). But neither should one perhaps go as far as saying: 'to understand everything is to despise everything' ('*Tout comprendre – c'est tout mépriser*'), to borrow a line from Nietzsche.[2] Hindsight is questionable, if it amounts to passing judgement on people struggling with the imponderable forces of history, in the world at large and within themselves.

2. From the second part of the Epilogue to *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*.

THE AMERICAN CONNECTION

The British writer, Evelyn Waugh, is reputed to have said that the average Irishman believes in only two ultimates: hell and the existence of the United States of America. The latter has obviously played a significant role in modern Irish history. It was to this land of opportunity that the Irish emigrated in large numbers after the Great Famine of the 1840s, and America also exerted influence on Britain throughout most of the twentieth century in relation to its policies in Ireland.

And 'hell' might be taken by some as the symbol for the way the Catholic Church ruled the minds and souls of the Catholic faithful for most of the last two hundred years. Threatened with eternal damnation, if they dared defy the laws laid down by the Church, it is true that the faithful were too often cowed into a crippling attitude of submissiveness. The result was that a critical, and above all, a self-critical attitude rarely got a chance to blossom in the higher echelons of Irish Catholic clerical life, or indeed anywhere else in the Irish Catholic world, ironically despite all the emphasis that was placed on the examination of conscience and on the confessing of sins.

'CATHEDRAL OF LIES'

The sad fruits of an uncritical, power-driven, and potentially arrogant and even bullying implementation of the Catholic faith have become distressingly obvious over the past two decades: witness the long litany of inquiries and official, government-commissioned reports. These have highlighted the cruelty meted out to children in Church-run institutions, the sexual ravages perpetrated by some Catholic priests and brothers on vulnerable people to whom they had a duty of care, and, finally, the serious dereliction of pastoral concern by Church officials who, though reliably informed of these crimes, preferred either to do nothing or to try actively to conceal them.

These grim details are now irremovably lodged in contemporary Irish consciousness. With the force of a tsunami they have swept aside the prestige of the Catholic Church in Ireland, and, simultaneously, any unguarded trust in its moral authority. The daunting edifice that until recent times was 'Official Irish Catholicism' can now be depicted in images such as Unamuno's *Cathedral of Lies*, or as a house of cards

that has collapsed, or as a structure whose imposing façade served to conceal much, but that had little of truly Christian substance within.

In Ireland over the last two centuries there have been great debates over the strength of the 'ultramontane' currents in Irish Church life in relation to what one might call the more native or 'Gallican' currents. These controversies, once apparently so central to the establishment of the Church's true identity, have largely been overshadowed by the disillusionment with Catholicism now spreading more and more inexorably throughout all sections of Irish society, both civil and religious. A sign of the discontent in clerical ranks is the emergence of a movement of Irish priests (The Association of Catholic Priests), with many hundreds of members, who are deeply unhappy with the way they have been led (or, some would say, not led or simply misled) by the bishops of Ireland.

When the public evidence of wrong-doing became too overwhelming to be ignored, Pope Benedict ordered an 'Apostolic Visitation' of the Irish Church, which was carried out early last year and the results of which were recently made known, at least in summary form.

The Vatican has also since appointed a new Nuncio to Ireland, a New Yorker, of partly Irish heritage, Archbishop Charles Brown, who has just arrived in Ireland to begin what is assumed to be a process of repairing if not broken, at least shaky, diplomatic bridges between Ireland and the Holy See, and also to encourage some modicum of 'renewal' in the Irish Church.

Ireland is the land, however, where the boycott was invented. There is a stubborn streak in the Irish make-up, and in a land no part of which the Romans (wisely?) ever ventured to control, and that the Normans and later even the English only haphazardly colonized, it is by no means certain that the Vatican, even with the most polished diplomatic service in the world, will be able to make much headway when it comes to changing Irish 'hearts and minds'.

WHERE TO NOW?

Thus far, this article has attempted to look at the past of the Catholic Church in Ireland. But equally important for a religion that claims to be historical, as Christianity always has done, is to look to the future.

Where can Irish Catholicism go from here? It is tempting at this point to recall, though not in any spirit of flippancy, the old Viennese saying that the situation is desperate, but not serious. This saying is indeed itself capable of being interpreted quite seriously. For it can reflect a profound belief and hope in the ability of divine grace to deal with even the most apparently hopeless and intractable of human situations. At the human level, faith and hope are genuine echoes of the divine creative act itself of calling the world forth 'out of nothing.' In that sense, Christianity seems to have inherited from its parent religion, Judaism, along with its belief in God as Creator, a stubborn refusal to abandon hope even in the face of multiple disasters.

For a constant pattern found throughout the Bible is the way human ambition in relation to God can lead to catastrophe, but out of the ashes of each catastrophe comes a new departure, believed to be of divine inspiration. For Christianity itself, the crucial example of this pattern is, of course, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Belief in the reality of God in Jesus is ultimately what distinguishes Christianity, rather than any weighing of the possibilities of goodness to be found either

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among the clergy or even, with admittedly more likelihood, among the laity. Or indeed, rather than any registering of the evils perpetrated by, or in the name of, the Church over time.

It is this reassertion of faith and hope that can give life direction where pure thought alone over and over again reaches a kind of impasse. Historical understanding may liberate from the shackles of the past, and to that extent be therapeutic, but it has no special insight into the future. This may be not unconnected with Kierkegaard's affirmation that life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards. The current situation of the Catholic Church in Ireland could, therefore, be seen as an opportunity to pause and reflect on whether one really would wish to see the new direction that is clearly required take the form of a Catholicism that could and would strut

proudly again on the world stage.

CHRISTIAN TRUTH ENDURES

It is salutary to recall that Christianity tells us we have no abiding city in this world (Heb 13:14). And cities built by Christian peoples can even disappear almost entirely, without Christianity ceasing to exist or to be true. The places most associated with the growth of Christianity, the places where the decisive Church Councils were held, where the beliefs of Christianity were refined and the great Christian thinkers flourished – almost all lying nowadays in modern Turkey and North Africa – are no longer Christian. Yet Christian truth can endure.

So, it may well be that Ireland's and indeed Europe's public culture generally will, as time goes on, lose more and more of its hitherto over-whelmingly Christian veneer. But the enduring truth of the Christian message will always find a way through to humanity. For religion is not something we have, but something we are. Similarly, the Church claims that Christian truth is not something we have, but what God is. And the living God can always be relied on to awaken living faith in the discerning, human heart.

In the current situation of religious crisis in Ireland, and elsewhere, it might be appropriate to invoke the 'Gamaliel Principle.' This is the principle enunciated by the famous Jewish rabbi, Gamaliel, in Acts 5:34-39, when he advised against trying to stamp out the nascent Christian movement on the grounds that, if it were from men only, it wouldn't last, but if it were from God, it couldn't be suppressed. In other words, divine truth will ultimately always reassert itself against the untruth of human make-believe.

How the truth of Christianity will express itself in the future can safely be left in God's hands – in Ireland, or anywhere else – for all that its implementation will inevitably fall into the fallible, but not untalented, hands of human beings.