

# Is Irish Catholicism Dying?<sup>1</sup>



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Over the last 40 years there have been massive changes in the practice of Catholicism in the Republic of Ireland.<sup>2</sup> I want to survey some of the most significant ones and suggest an evangelical response.

## 1. Vatican 2 has been implemented in word, but is not followed in spirit.

The purpose of the second Vatican Council (1963 – 1965) was to bring the Church up to date. At the time Irish Catholicism was very traditional, and felt threatened by the changes proposed. Many changes followed: the mass was soon in English and Irish rather than Latin, a new Bible in Irish was produced by Maynooth College, ecumenical conferences were organised, and the Religious Orders updated their Constitutions.

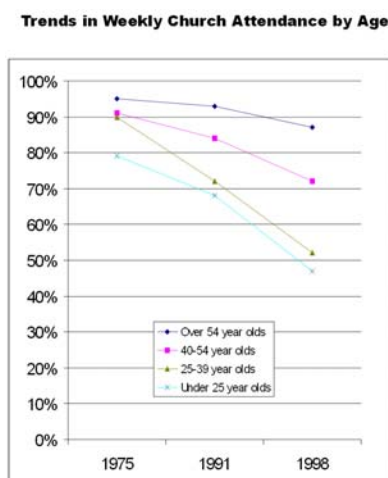
However Fr Brendan Hoban, writing in Reality<sup>3</sup> in 1999 saw much of what was done as window dressing :

*In the years after the second Vatican council, change was introduced gradually, almost stealthily. The principle was that if significant change could be introduced while the faithful were assured that nothing had really changed, change would be assimilated in a kind of osmosis. The result is that one of the best kept secrets of the Irish church is the division between two quite distinct views of church. One - authoritarian, disciplined, regulated, rigid, autocratic, centred on the priesthood, with a predictable liturgy, a morality with clearly defined parameters, and with a clear and ready answer to every human predicament. The second, the church of the Vatican council centred on the rights of every baptised person, on the need for lay participation, on consultation, dialogue, lay ministry.*

Bishops are still chosen, not because of their leadership qualities but because of their orthodoxy - especially in relation to contraception, celibacy, and the ordination of women. Local priests and parishes have very little say in their appointment.

## 2. Mass attendance though high by European standards has dropped to around 50%.

Diagram 1 illustrates mass attendance over the years.



Listen to Sean Freyne , former Biblical Professor of Trinity College, Dublin:

*If it is true that the Church is really itself when it prays, then the Catholic Church in Ireland is far from well. It is not enough to trot out the statistics about our Mass attendances. The overall figures do not indicate the underlying trends as the parents of any teenager can tell you, or as a visit to some urban parishes will readily confirm. It is what happens to those who go that is more disturbing. The truth is that in many instances our liturgical leaders have neither the imagination, the skills or even the conviction to generate an atmosphere conducive to achieving communal identity. (Furrow, Oct 93)<sup>4</sup>*

### **3. The Encyclical on birth control is on the back burner.**

*Humani Vitae* (On the regulation of birth, 1968, Pope Paul VI) came after numerous committees and study groups had been set up by the Vatican, and its conclusions were surprising to most scholars in the Roman Church. It seemed to run counter to all that Vatican 2 had started. It caused enormous pain in Irish family life, and many priests used the confessional to probe into the inner recesses of family intimacy.

Tony Flannery, a Redemptorist priest speaks of his experience:

*I spent hours in countless confession boxes listening to married people, almost invariably women, explaining their circumstances to me, and asking my opinion. ....Here was I, young, inexperienced, having no personal knowledge of marriage or sexual relationships, and having a poor understanding of the physical, mental and emotional make-up of women, being asked to make judgements and give advice on the most intimate area of their lives. I heard stories of women who were terrified of getting pregnant for various health reasons, and did not want to commit sin by using contraceptives.<sup>5</sup>*

This priest used what is known as the 'pastoral solution'. He tried to get them to do the best in their circumstances, trying not to impose impossible burdens on them.

Young people today simply ignore the church's stance on birth control - more than that, they often use the pill outside marriage. The number of live births outside wedlock in Ireland overtook the European average for the first time in 1996.

### **4. Our politicians no longer look over their shoulder to the Bishops.**

Over the last 20 years there has been greater independence of thinking and action on the part of politicians and a greater diffidence on the part of the Bishops to dictate people's behaviour.

Three factors have been important.

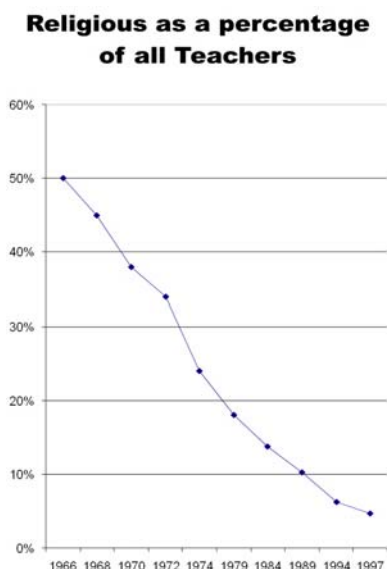
- Gareth Fitzgerald made a lot of the Anglo-Irish Agreement to introduce legislation that would make Ireland appear less sectarian.
- The women's movement has been influential in changing opinions.
- And the pressure for much social legislation originates in Brussels - and Ireland has been glad to be part of the European Union.

In areas of family planning, legalisation regarding homosexuality, introduction of divorce legislation and abortion, the State has introduced legislation contrary to the moral ethos of the Catholic Church. In our hospitals sterilisation, tubal ligation, and vasectomy have been

available since the 1980s - due to increasing influence on policy from the government. Our two recent lady presidents have both spoken from a very liberal point of view.

Whereas earlier the Bishops would tell the people how to vote, now they tell them to use their conscience - what was formerly regarded as a protestant idea.

## 5. Irish schools are fast losing their Catholic ethos.



All catholic schools in the ROI were set up by the religious orders but today all the teachers of general subjects are secular teachers, and over 75% of religion teachers are lay teachers who have chosen to teach religion (see diagram).

Schools still have beginning and end of term masses, but they are becoming less important and Retreats are becoming more difficult to run because of the shortage of priests.

The Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI) reported in 1991 that many parents and teachers of pupils in Catholic schools lack any faith commitment.

According to one teacher from Tipperary:

*Almost every catechist who teachers at senior secondary school level can testify to the resistance, sometimes downright antagonism to religious education<sup>6</sup>*

Until recently RE was a compulsory yet unexamined subject in schools. Since then exams have been introduced at Junior and Senior levels. These new syllabi include a greater stress on the Bible, on other denominations and on comparative religion.

## 6. Confession is the invisible sacrament.

In most parishes there is now only half an hour a week when Confession is available. Earlier, people would have not taken the Eucharist without going to Confession the night before. With dramatically different views than in the past on moral values the sense of sin has been blunted so the demand for Confession as a sacrament has dropped dramatically. In some places special Reconciliation Services are held at Christmas and Easter to try and remedy the situation for thousands at a time:

*Pastoral people are keenly aware that while reception of reconciliation in the confession box has dropped dramatically people still have a sense of sin and need forgiveness. A number of parishes including ours in Tullamore have been attempting in various ways over the last number of years to reach out to that need, working with various forms of the reconciliation rite that combine individual absolution with a communal setting.<sup>7</sup>*

The need for people to face themselves has also expressed itself in a new way:

*The decline of the Catholic Church's influence in the last two decades has coincided with the rise of the phone-in on Irish radio, where a nation confesses its darkest heresies and most startling sexual unorthodoxies to a new priesthood of silver-tongued jockeys.<sup>8</sup>*

## **7. The statues have moved and the bones are still travelling.**

In 1985 a group of children claimed to have seen a statue of the Madonna and child in the local church open its eyes and move its hands. This resulted in the church becoming a place of pilgrimage for some months. This was only the first of several so-called sightings throughout the country in the summer of 1985, the best known being the grotto of Ballinspittle in west Cork. Almost half a million people reportedly visited the shrine that year. There was a resurgence of Marian devotion, directed at shrines throughout the country.

In 2001 3 million people touched the bones - or to be exact half the bones - of St Thierese of Liseux, and in 2002 the bones of St Anthony were on the move around Ireland.

All of this is indicative of a very conservative element in Irish Catholicism, a form of religion that deeply touches the emotions without changing the heart:

*It's a curious thing, do you know, how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve.<sup>9</sup>*

## **8. The scandals may be the last nail in the coffin for the Church.**

The media was rocked in 1992 by the revelation that Eamonn Casey, Bishop of Galway had fathered a child 17 years before. Since then there have been revelations of serial sexual abuse of children by priests, and what appears to have been a culture of neglect and abuse of children in religious institutions in the 1950s and 60s. Unmarried mothers were also sent away to institutions and their babies sold to American donors. Many of these issues have been featured in the media.

It means that at the very time when Irish Catholicism was at its height it has now been shown to have been in the depths. Catholicism was unable to rise higher than the accepted conventions of the day in the way, for example, children were treated.

### *The handling of the issue*

What has been of such concern to journalists, politicians and ultimately the public is that the Church has shown more concern with protecting its own reputation than in showing compassion to the victims.

## 9. Church manpower is plummeting.

Diagram 3, below, shows figures for recruitment to the vocations. There have been many factors contributing to the decline. There are now many more educational opportunities in Ireland. Celibacy is far less attractive in today sex-mad world, and the scandals haven't helped parents to encourage their children to join the priesthood.

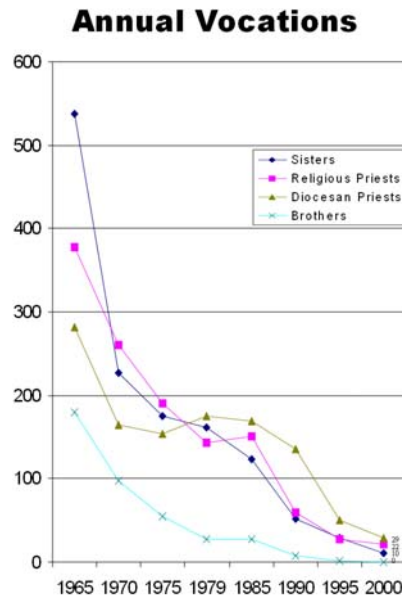
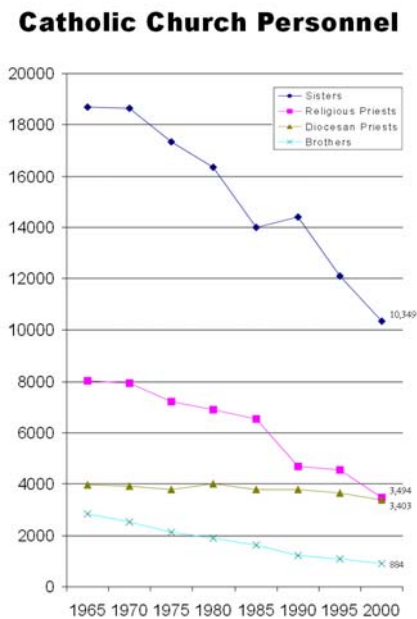


Diagram 4, below, shows the level of manpower over the years. The only area that is holding out is the diocesan clergy. But the average age of priests is increasing all the time. Some parishes are now without a priest.



Maynooth College, just outside Dublin is the only college for training priests. All the others (Carlow, Kilkenny, Wexford, Waterford, Holy Cross – Dublin, and Thurles) closed between 1989 and 2002.

In his book *Moral Monopoly* Tom Inglis argues that Irish Catholicism has been characterised by a high level of adherence to the Church's rules and regulations. This adherence is not simply voluntary but is produced through the Church's control of churches, schools, hospitals and homes. The declining numbers of church personnel to enforce this control accounts for the decreasing role of the church in national life.

**10. The influx of immigrants of many different faiths make less credible the claim of the Catholic faith to be the only true way of salvation.**

Over the last 10 years Ireland's population has changed from a monochrome Irish catholic one, to include people from all over the world: Polish Catholics, Nigerian Pentecostals, Iranian Muslims are just a few examples. Ireland has found it difficult to adjust, and it has certainly shaken the old certainties.

**11. The 'Celtic Tiger', a euphemism for Ireland's growing prosperity has turned people's thoughts from the world to come to this world below.**

**Summary.**

It is interesting to see how some Irish priest are reflecting on their own Church:

*For the most part Irish congregations have been fed a theological algebra without ever being afforded the experience of participating in a living theological question. (John O'Donoghue, priest of diocese of Galway, Furrow, Dec 91)*

*Through this testing (of the scandals), God is reminding us that because we've used our religion rather than lived the gospel, we've built our lives on false foundations (Thomas O'Connor, priest of diocese of Meath, Furrow, Jan 2003)*

*It seems to me that we have put the institution of the Church above the message it exists to serve. We have allowed power-structures to become self-serving rather than gospel - or people-serving. (Owen O'Sullivan, Capuchin priest, Belfast, Furrow, Jan 03)*

*For a long time I had great enthusiasm for the life of the (Redemptorist) congregation, playing my part on councils and committees both at national and international level, and I did my stint as a superior. I find it harder and harder now to find the energy for that side of my life. Overseeing the death throes of a once thriving institution is not very pleasant, and more and more of my age group in all religious orders are tending to opt out of positions of responsibility and to, in a sense, do our own thing. When you see little future for the institution to which you have committed your life, ...it is not easy to stay on and retain one's sanity. (Tony Flannery, Redemptorist Priest)<sup>10</sup>*

## What will the future Catholic Church in Ireland look like?

It won't stop overnight, but the trends we see today seem set to continue. It may well be that as in other parts of the world we will see more foreign priests, maybe from Nigeria, Korea or South America. Much control still comes from Rome, so some things won't change. Recently I attended mass in Austin, Texas, where Catholicism is no longer the majority faith. Yet I found all the main ingredients: Mary, the Mother of God and the saints as our intercessors, the Pope as our Holy Father, the priest as mediator, transubstantiation, readings from the Apocrypha, purgatory, and good works as the way of salvation.

We may well see more zany Catholicism. Pete McCarthy gives a sample:

*This tiny piece of land between the house and the beach is rich in ancient sites: there are several standing stones and Celtic crosses, a holy well, a salmon pool that features in Irish mythology, a Viking burial, a ruined early Christian church and an unconsecrated children cemetery. On Sundays Dara says his own version of mass out here in the open air. At other times he leads pilgrims in the rounds - a traditional Celtic spiritual practice from 5<sup>th</sup> century monks.<sup>11</sup>*

## How do we as Evangelicals respond?

The issue raised in this paper is important in a country where over 80% of the population identify themselves as Catholics and evangelicals are only 2%. The important place the Church plays in society and the pressure from families not to 'rock the boat' keep many from hearing and responding to the gospel. Yet what is happening should encourage us.

The idea of the new covenant - of a free, unconstrained response to God's love is an idea whose time has come:

*I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. And I will be their God and they will be my people... They shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest... For I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more. (see Jer. 31:33-34).*

Equally the idea of a local congregation of believers, governed by its leaders and members, directly responsible to Christ, is an idea not out of line with aspirations in Ireland today.

Let me make some specific suggestions for the way forward.

1. *We must continue and expand our seed- sowing ministries* through radio, TV, the internet and books. There is opportunity for ventures like schools work, drug education, Bible exhibitions.
2. *We must aim for quality in the churches we establish*, even if at this stage we are disappointed with the quantity. We must do well on those occasions when others come into our buildings, who previously would never dare, for weddings, funerals, baptisms, and dedications.
3. *We must aim to keep our young people.* It is important that we give wholesome, balanced, biblical teaching on sex, prepare believers to be good parents and help Christian singles to meet one another. Our young people must feel that it is a great adventure to follow Christ and serve him.
4. *We must prepare new workers sensitively.* New workers still need to understand traditional Catholicism, even when it is on the wane, because so much about Irish Society can only be understood against this background.

5. *We must have a global dimension.* While we want to see Irish people converted and Irish churches established we have to come to terms with the fact that many of our congregations come from overseas, and many of our Irish young people will leave these shores.

6. *We must preach the gospel confidently.* Many of the secular books on this subject lack any real theological reflection. The idea that possibly some of the problems may be due to a fatal flaw in Catholic theology never seemed to occur to the writers. We believe God's truth matters. But if that is so it needs to be articulated, and communicated to today's generation.

*Therefore having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's Word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. (see 2 Cor. 4:1-3).*

## Footnotes

1. This is the title of a book by Peadar Kirby (Cork: Mercier Press, 1984). Many other books with similar titles have been published since then: *Moral Monopoly: Rise & Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* by Tom Inglis (Gill & Macmillan, 1987 - 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1998); *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland* by Mary Kenny (Dublin: New Ireland, 1997); *The End of Irish Catholicism?* By D Vincent Twomey (Veritas, 2003).
2. A fuller historical treatment is given in *Irish Catholicism Since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* by Louise Fuller (Gill & Macmillan, 2002) from which I have drawn data for this article, including most of the charts.
3. *Reality* is a monthly Redemptorist Publication.
4. *The Furrow* is a pastoral monthly published in Maynooth, Co Kildare.
5. Tony Flannery, *From the Inside: A Priest's View of the Catholic Church* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1999), pp.109-112.
6. *Furrow*, Dec 91.
7. Martin Kennedy, Priest of Co. Offaly, *Intercom*, March 2003. *Intercom*, a pastoral and liturgical resource, is published each month by Veritas and goes to every priest in Ireland.
8. Pete McCarthy, *McCarthy's Bar* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2000), p.81. The book is a light-hearted journal of discovery in Ireland.
9. James Joyce, *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*.
10. Tony Flannery *From the Inside*, pp.176-177.
11. Pete McCarthy, *McCarthy's Bar*, pp.248-251.

## About the Author:

John Tuttlebee is from England and is a missionary with the European Christian Mission in the Republic of Ireland, where he has lived for the past 25 years.

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