

‘The Memory and Amnesia of Irish Catholicism’

Introduction

2009 was a landmark year for Irish Catholicism for two reasons. First, it marked the 30th anniversary of Pope John Paul II’s 1979 coming to Ireland. By most accounts, this was a landmark event in Irish social and cultural history. It was the first papal pastoral visit to the island. It was commemorated via a wide range of mnemonic devices such as radio documentaries, photographic exhibitions, and religious rituals. These all recalled the Pope’s praising of the faithful of their long fidelity to the Catholic faith, his urging of their resistance to the modern forces of secularisation, and his pleading with paramilitaries to give up their violent political actions.

For another reason 2009 was a watershed year in Irish Catholicism. 2009 saw the publication of two massive – literally and figuratively – reports – the Ryan report and the Murphy report – named after the judges who presided over the deliberations of legal inquiries into the running of Catholic institutions called ‘industrial schools’ and ‘reformatories’ for children, on the onehand, and the Catholic church’s (mis)management of cases of clerical child sex abuse in the Archdiocese of Dublin, on the other. The full title of the Ryan report revealed the darker pasts about Irish Catholicism it sought to unveil – the Ryan report was an abbreviation of the ‘Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse’. These two events in the collective memory of Irish Catholicism represented two very different pasts – one a triumphal, positive and even glorious past, the other a tragic, negative and difficult past. And both pasts were remembered very differently – one through official government legal discourse and political mobilisation by victim advocacy groups (and not by an amnesiac church), the other through a church-sponsored repertoire of well-known mnemonic devices. In what follows I try to provide a descriptive account of the difficult pasts that Irish society is currently attempting to come to terms with, remember, and weave into its national self-identity.

Two Reports

Let’s begin with the Ryan report. This five-volume report was the written account of an inquiry set up by the Irish state into the running of what have come to be termed ‘industrial schools’ and ‘reformatories’. These were large institutions funded by the state but run by Catholic (male and female) religious orders to care for the needs of boys and girls sent to them because of behavioural difficulties, family abandonment, and parental neglect. In the children that were sent to them there was a strong class effect – the children of manual working-class people were disproportionately represented. In a sense these institutions were set up to provide a substitute home for unwanted children in Irish society. They were located in both

urban and rural areas but more usually in remote rural areas and this spatial distance – together with their high boundary walls – set them apart from the local community.

There was nothing necessarily “new”, however, about hearing about the confinement of people in Catholic institutions for their spiritual, moral and educational reform. Consider, for example, that the placing of ‘fallen women’ in what were known as ‘mother and baby homes’ and ‘laundries’ was already well documented from the mid-1990s by docudramas that brought these institutions and their daily routines and practices into ordinary people’s awareness. What was new though about the Ryan report was its finding about the sheer scale of this Catholic network of institutions, that they extended to vulnerable children as well as adults, and that were similarly structured and organised – people sent to them were subject to hard labour, kept in difficult physical environments, subjected to harsh disciplinary methods, and all aspects of their everyday lives came under the control and supervision of religious and clergy. To be sure, some of these religious were sympathetic and kind to the children in their care but a large number were harsh and cruel and in a minority of cases sadistic.

In this story about child cruelty and abuse that the Ryan report revealed, more than the standing of the Catholic church was at stake. What was also brought to the surface was how Irish society – and Irish families in particular – saw fit to treat its children in this way and to condone their sending off to these institutions instead of remaining with their families in their own communities.

The findings of the Ryan report brought other ‘big’ issues into the public square as well. One of the most important related to the role of the Catholic church in the Irish educational system and whether or not its dominance of school management structures should continue in the future. The history of institutional abuse resulting from the church’s dominant educational role documented by Judge Ryan gave impetus to calls for Catholic disengagement from school management positions.

More than anything else though, the Ryan report validated the voice of survivors of these Catholic institutions whose truths had been suppressed for many years. The report raised their experiences to the level of official truth and gave them authority to exert claims on the Irish state and Irish Catholic church for redress and compensation for their abuse and ill-treatment. Already the church has transferred some of its assets to the state to pay for the costs associated with counselling and other forms of victim redress. The Irish state plans an official act of remembrance to honour their tragic life-histories.

As if Irish Catholics could not be more shocked, a few months after the publication of the Ryan report a second report was published about Irish Catholicism. Named ‘the Murphy report’, it chronicled the handling of the Archdiocese of Dublin of allegations of child abuse against a sample of its priests. Covering a time period from 1975 to the 2004 and based upon a sample of priests, it detailed an institutional pattern of the systematic suppression of information about priests who abused children. The most oft-cited line of the report was that the church was motivated in its actions by the ‘avoidance of scandal’ (Murphy, 2009, p. 237) rather than to protect children from criminal clerical abuse. Responding to the findings of the report, the Irish Catholic hierarchy accepted them and even pointed to a ‘culture’ within the church that lay at the heart of the problem. This analysis suggested that this wasn’t

just a story about a few individual priests behaving badly but of an institution with a flawed moral tissue. Ordinary faithful Catholics and the vast majority of clergy and religious nobly living out their own vocations, long used to hearing homiletic messages from bishops about the importance of human sexuality, of the dangers of its misuse or abuse, and of the need to atone for one's past sexual sins, expected better.

In subsequent public commentary about the Ryan and Murphy report findings, various explanations were put forward for what happened – a culture of secrecy in Irish Catholicism, ordinary people's deference to clergy, church training and recruitment processes, inadequate knowledge of the nature of paedophilia, the collusion of state actors with church officials, the preservation of institutional reputation and standing, and the avoidance of embarrassment and shame. Whatever the reasons for the tragic patterns and regularities identified by the two reports, thousands of Irish children experienced an upbringing they would never forget.

One Letter

After calling the Irish Catholic hierarchy to Rome to discuss the findings and implications of the Ryan and Murphy reports, Pope Benedict published a pastoral letter to the Irish Catholic faithful expressing his strong condemnation of abusing priests and of the church's management structures to deal with it. Echoing the Pope's earlier injunction to the Irish hierarchy during their 2006 Ad Limina visit to unveil the truth of what happened, to ensure it did not happen again, to help bring about healing for the victims, and to uphold the principle of justice, the letter went further than many people's expectations by offering a papal apology and by lamenting the hierarchy's grievous past failures in leadership. It opens by placing the presenting problem – clerical child abuse and the church's handling of it – in the context of the Irish people's long association with and fidelity to Roman Catholicism and then goes on to address itself to different audiences – to the victims, to the perpetrators, to parents, to children and young people, to priests, to ordinary Catholics, and to the Irish bishops.

Part personal reflection, part social analysis, and part Catholic theology, it is frank in its acknowledgment of child abuse as a crime and of the crisis it has given rise to in the Irish church. It challenges the Irish church to deal effectively with the problem but is encouraging of it as well. It found a largely receptive reaction in Ireland though some victim survivor groups criticised the Pope for sidestepping the important issue of Rome's own implication in the clerical child abuse scandals. Catholic sources were careful to highlight it as one part of a longer pathway towards reconciliation and healing for both the church and for victims.

Untaken Paths – A Soft Church for Hard Times?

In the light of these developments, the future of Irish Catholicism is uncertain. In his 2010 Lenten letter, Bishop Willie Walsh of Killaloe called for the Irish church to be more humble and contrasted this with an earlier time when the church and its leaders tended to be viewed much less critically. This 'soft' church for 'hard' times model – and the disavowal of the 'hard' church in 'soft' times model chronicled by



the Murphy and Ryan reports – brings into focus the need for a searching examination of the church's relationship to Irish society and vice versa.

To be sure, the last word has not been heard in the story about clerical child abuse within the Irish Catholic Church. More claims and counter-claims about mishandling of abusing priests are likely to continue to emerge for some time. All of this is part of a process of public remembering of past trauma – of the tragic stories of children (many now adults) abused by adults entrusted to care for them. With the passage of time many of these privately kept memories of what happened will become public, while many that are just too close to the bone, will likely never travel into public space at all.

References

Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse. (2009). The full report is available from <http://www.childabusecommission.com/rpt/pdfs/> (last accessed 24 March 2010).

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