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## The People had Left the Room

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## – *Vatican II and the Decline of Religious Practice in Ireland*

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Geraldine O’Dea

Fifty-one years ago, on 8 December 1965, Vatican II concluded with great ceremony. Such ceremony was justified as it represented a major effort by the Church to face the issues of the modern world. As such, it was a pastoral rather than dogmatic council at which doctrine was neither promulgated nor declared but it was aimed, in theory, at the human person who was perceived as increasingly alienated from the institutional church.

In the Republic of Ireland in the sixties, such a drift had started. In the middle of the twentieth century, Catholics numbered 94% of the population with a weekly Mass attendance of 91%. By 2012, the figures were 84% Catholic but with a weekly Mass attendance of 35% and the decline continues. Does this demographic represent an inevitable result of postmodern relativism or could Vatican II have done more to halt the decline? Did its efforts to face modern issues in fact reverberate in Ireland? Despite the attempt by the Council to maintain a Christocentric approach, did the people’s perspective of the Church as an institution rather than a community persist? What effect did the Council have on the Church in Ireland and the laity? Did it greatly affect the practice of religion or even, by encouraging the primacy of individual conscience, hasten the decline of practice? Or rather in fact, was the decline the result of the failure of the Church in Ireland to communicate adequately to the laity the new exegesis of scripture and tradition, the new dynamism and spirit of the Church looking to the modern world?

It would be impossible to describe in a short article the extent of the work of the Council which was spread over three years and produced finally sixteen documents. Though these documents cover a wide range of subjects at great length, relatively small numbers of the world’s laity became familiar with them. There was no equivalent to the ease of a click on Google or Vatican twitter feed in those days. The two documents that most concern lay people in the world are *Dignitatis Humanae*, On Religious Liberty and

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*Gaudium et Spes*, the Church in the Modern World. The keyword associated with the Council was *aggiornamento* – bringing up to date or modernising. It was the stated aim of the Council to speak to all the people and not to be a Council for just the clergy. Multiple changes were initiated in areas of direct concern to the laity – the use of the vernacular, the repositioning of altars, and considerable adjustments in religious practice and liturgy – all very much in line with the idea of *aggiornamento*. In fact, the Council expressed great enthusiasm for the participation of the laity.

Marriage and the ends thereof were discussed at length but finally a generous and gentle statement was drawn up and agreed recognising the ‘equal personal dignity that must be accorded to man and wife in mutual and unreserved affection’ and ignoring the previous held belief that marriage was – apart from the creation of children – a remedy for concupiscence. As Fr John W. O’Malley has pointed out in his book the use of the word ‘dignity’ pervades the text of *Gaudium et Spes*, ‘dignity of freedom, the dignity of conscience, the dignity of marriage, the dignity of human culture, and, finally, the dignity of the human person’<sup>1</sup>.

However, the documents issued by the Council were chiefly concerned with the Church as an institution and the lives of the clergy. While acknowledging the changes in the world and religious practice, they appear to look more to historical and traditional precedents rather than taking adequate account of the global revolution in society happening as they debated. And Irish society was changing in the sixties as never before, more questioning, more critical of established institutions, not least the Church.

At the end of the fifties, the Republic of Ireland was a conservative and largely rural country, an island behind an island, and as such, subject to British influence and culture and heavily dependent on the British economy. Consequently, it was largely insulated from and ignorant of continental Europe: 60% of the population was rural – which fell to 50% by 1966 due to the flow of people to the cities and, not least, emigration. Parents seeing their children leaving the country for America and, in fewer cases, Australia, had little expectation of seeing them again. The cost of travel then precluded this. Agriculture was the major occupation with the majority of farms being less than fifty acres. In 1950, our living standard compared with that of the rest of Europe ranked us below Germany and only just above Italy, two countries economically devastated by WW2.

The great impetus to change in Ireland was economic planning introduced famously by Ken Whitaker, Secretary of the Department of Finance under the auspices of Seán Lemass in 1958. Since

1 *Op.cit.*, p.267

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WW2, the economy had stagnated under the protectionist policies of De Valera. Employment and emigration were high and in fact by 1961, the population had declined to a low of 2.7 million. There had been little drive for change such as had motivated Europe after WW2 and Ireland appeared isolated, insular in thought and action and, in the fifties, sunk in a recession with an alarming rate of emigration. With the publication of the five year plan, *Economic Development*, formulated by Ken Whitaker, the country lurched into the twentieth century. The concept of a planned economy was viewed with suspicion initially as having a Marxist tone but it quickly led to rapid advances in the social sciences, agriculture, education and finance to the point that the government through the civil service exerted more and more control over the country. Writing with some prescience in 1970, Professor Basil Chubb said: ‘it may well become more and more difficult for democracy to keep a toehold in the crevices between the great organizations of the public and private sectors’<sup>2</sup> – and, he might have added, the Church. Politically, the population was always engaged, though with local rather than international politics, and with the North and the border. But more than any other initiative in the sixties, what drove the societal revolution was the inauguration of television in 1962. In his address at RTE’s first broadcast, De Valera compared television to atomic energy and feared its influence would lead to decadence and disillusion in Irish society. Certainly the Late Late Show, first broadcast in 1962 had huge impact especially with its open approach to sex and sexuality in Ireland never before a topic for public discussion and could be deemed to have kick-started the sexual revolution in Ireland. Its challenge of societal norms led inevitably to clashes with the Church led by John Charles McQuaid, Archbishop of Dublin from 1940-72. Fighting an almost rearguard action, a group of Catholics priests produced a series, *Radharc*, first broadcast in 1962. In that broadcast, described by Diarmaid Ferriter in his book, *Occasions of Sin*, the presenter, a priest, recounted the efforts being made in Glenties for the Tidy Towns competition where everyone cleaned and painted their houses as an act of religion<sup>3</sup>. The Corpus Christi procession in the town was also a particularly special occasion when shopkeepers replaced the merchandise in their shop windows with altars and the priest asked people to emulate the Blessed Virgin with tidiness and her other virtues. It is no surprise that the Late Late Show was literally explosive in communities such as this all over Ireland where civic and religious life were up to now intimately entwined.

2 *The Government and Politics of Ireland*, Oxford University Press, London, Stanford University Press, 1970

3 *Occasions of Sin*, Profile Books, 2009

## ENTWINEMENT

In fact, ‘entwined’ is a conservative term for the overpowering role religion and religious events played in lives in the late fifties and pre-Vatican II days. All meetings and events started with ‘Reverend Father, Ladies and Gentlemen’ – because the parish priest was almost certainly there in the middle of the front row. Sunday Mass was a *sine qua non* and a grave mortal sin was the penalty for missing it: young people went from their Saturday night parties to one of the dawn Masses that existed then in Dublin. Lent was a serious business for children and adults alike and daily Mass the rule rather than the exception. Sacraments were treated with utmost reverence and never social occasions, apart from marriage which was always held early because of the requirement to fast from midnight before receiving the Eucharist. First Holy Communion was then also held early in the day often followed by a cup of tea and buns – and in some lucky areas, breakfast – after which the dress was removed and carefully packed away for the next sister. One received a few gifts such as a prayer book and, particularly, holy pictures which were collected and swapped like cigarette cards after the event! Confirmation was a staid school affair and rarely the occasion for any celebration. And of course, Confession was at least once a fortnight, a painful ritual particularly for teenagers who had quickly learnt that sex, and especially thoughts about sex, were the only sins and mortal sin was a reality. It was the clear assumption that every bride had the right to wear white such was the influence of religion and the fear of damnation clearly spelt out from the pulpits in the Ireland of the time.

The sixties in fact marked a watershed for clerical power and church state relations in the country. John Charles McQuaid involved himself and the Church in all aspects of Irish life, political, social and religious. He was routinely involved or consulted on impending legislation. His opposition on health matters is now well documented but he greatly feared that the provision of health care for all mothers would lead to abortion and birth control. Though in the sixties, strict censorship was ameliorated, he kept a close eye on films and books to assess their morality and complained, if he felt necessary, to the Department of Justice. His influence was so great that the government felt that opposing him would win them no friends among the largely conservative and tradition-bound citizens. Diarmaid Ferriter, in *Occasions of Sin*, relates that when Brian Lenihan initiated liberalisation of the censorship law he said that ‘any major changes would have to be preceded by consultation with church authorities’<sup>4</sup>. McQuaid notoriously said to his diocesans on his return from the final session of Vatican 2,

4 *Occasions of Sin*, Profile Books, 2009, p.387

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‘no change will worry the tranquillity of your Christian lives’. He was wrong.

### MAJOR CHANGE

There was in fact major change occurring in unstoppable fashion. Not only was change occurring in society particularly in the cities but so too in the Church’s relationship with the state. The issue of church-state separation was raised by several Fathers in the initial debates on the documents particularly in the Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae* and The Constitution on the Church in the World Today, *Gaudium et Spes*. Whereas the Council shied away from an outright declaration on the question of separation, it said that ‘the community and the Church are independent of each other, and are autonomous, each in its own field’<sup>5</sup>. Independence of the Church in the State is not separation and, as the documents make clear, freedom within the State and the Church’s transcendence to the world were the issues together with a recognition of the duality of the person who as Leo XIII said is ‘both citizen and Christian’. However, in 1972, an amendment to the Constitution was passed, following a referendum, which deleted recognition of the special position of the Catholic Church.

McQuaid had little enthusiasm for the Council. He did attend it faithfully but was slow to implement changes when he returned particularly in the liturgy and increased lay participation as he considered them of little moment though he seems to have enjoyed contacts he made through the ‘new’ ecumenism especially with like-minded prelates from other, chiefly, Protestant communities. Masses were now said in English and altars moved so the priest now faced the people – often a rather bewildered community who had little explained to them, upsetting their acceptance of practices they considered normative. The liturgy was altered, again with little or no explanation with the result that to many it all appeared to be a rather cosmetic exercise. The elderly pined for the old familiar rituals; the young had other distractions.

The post-war growth of global capitalism was making itself felt together with the neoliberal doctrine of individualism bolstering the egoism of the young now exposed to new meanings and values from contact with other cultures through the media, especially television. Relaxation of the censorship laws made new books, magazines and films available goading the integrity of social and cultural dialectics. As Neil Ormerod points out ‘the Church had a classicist understanding of culture as a normative ideal that it possessed and others must attain’<sup>6</sup> and was now in

<sup>5</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n.76

<sup>6</sup> ‘The Times They are A-Changin’ in *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* (David G. Schultenover, ed.) *Continuum*, NY, London, 2008

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conflict as tradition and mores came under attack. Further, the repeated emphasis in the documents from the Council, particularly *Gaudium et Spes*, on the ‘dignity of conscience and its freedom of choice’ [n.40] encouraged an independence of thought and action previously unthinkable. Conscience is to be the ultimate arbiter on moral choice – as indeed it always had been but never so clearly or repeatedly stated. The fact that the Council emphasised that a conscience should be informed by the Church’s teachings and guidance, was secondary to many who seized on the idea of the primacy of conscience itself. This had particular relevance to a burning issue at the time, that of birth control. Many expected that with the advent of the ‘pill’<sup>7</sup> the ruling of the Church might change during the Council. The lack of a favourable ruling – and the subsequent issue of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 – led many to turn their back on Confession or to decide that their ‘conscience’ would not allow them to have more children – or not yet.

### PRESERVING THE INSTITUTION

The recognition and the promise of a new way of being in the world, learning from the world, while being very much part of *Gaudium et Spes* was not broadcast to the people. Rather than looking for a ‘new way of being in the world’, the Church in Ireland seemed hardwired into preserving the institution of the Church rather than encouraging a sense of community and facing down the growing cult of individualism. This failure was a major contributory cause of the decline in church attendance. Coverage in the media was less than adequate but, vitally, the import and essence of what had happened at the Council was not transmitted from the altars in Ireland. Enthusiasm for lay participation in the parishes was patchy and slow to develop and female involvement, in particular, was only very gradually accepted – other than to clean the churches and arrange the flowers. Even in the late sixties, the idea of women coming into the sanctuary as ministers of the word was rejected in many churches. The idea that the Church could learn from a culture rather than insisting on forming that culture was almost revolutionary but was a concept that passed by the Church in Ireland for the most part. The language and tone of that document in particular, being pastoral and empirical rather than juridical, was not repeated from the altars here in the sixties – or even the seventies. Rather it seeped in as the Church played catch-up with a dwindling audience. The people had left the room.

7 The contraceptive pill, by preventing conception was not therefore an abortifacient.