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# FURROW

*The*

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

*Brendan Hoban*

## A Letter to Dominic Meehan and Others

July/August 2017

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Recently, in the pages of *The Furrow*, two priests – Ignatius McQuillan (May, 2017) and Dominic Meehan (June, 2017) – have responded to my article, ‘A Lost Tribe’ (February, 2017), about the well-being of priests. I thank them both, not just for putting pen to paper to make their sensible and balanced points but for the sensitivity and kindness of their contributions.

While I wouldn’t agree with all they say, I find it difficult to disagree with most of it. In regard to Ignatius’ contribution all I would say is that while I accept his point that loneliness and isolation are movable feasts depending on the whims of personality, not all retired priests are as blessed as he obviously is in the support-systems around him. My article, I hope, didn’t suggest that every retired priest was in need of company or even care but that for some, possibly I suspect for many, there’s a problem here that needs to be addressed. And my sense is that it’s getting worse.

I was at a meeting recently about the well being of priests where someone suggested that the problem was not among those who were in attendance but those isolated and depressed who hadn’t the energy to turn up. Little wonder that those tasked with ‘the care of priests’ often simply don’t know what to do, even where to begin. It’s both a daunting and frightening challenge. I accept that retirement and old age can be for some a happy and contented time. But my particular focus was on those at risk.

From Dominic’s contribution I discover that Cashel shares with Dublin and Killala the not unexpected news that each of those dioceses has just one diocesan priest under 40 years of age, an omen for the future, especially for Dublin with 199 parishes but even for Killala with 22. Despite that, he suggests that ‘for the sake of the under 40s,’ and in the interest of balance I should write about the beauty of my ‘many years of service’. But the focus of my article was to draw attention to the burgeoning problem of elderly priests living alone not the need to jolly up a few under 40s. My

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article had a narrow focus – elderly and retired priests at risk – and didn't (couldn't?) cover everything. And that's not being negative, just real. (For negative, see below).

### ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC PRIESTS

Can I take the opportunity of not so much justifying my thoughts in 'A Lost Tribe' but of setting out my approach and the policy of the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP) in choosing particular issues and in robustly arguing our positions, though not always to the satisfaction of our fellow-priests? I need to make it clear that I'm not conflating my personal style or beliefs with those of the ACP, though clearly there is to some degree an over-lap between the two.

When a group of about eight priests – diocesan, missionary, religious and an abbot – met in Athlone in June, 2010 we were very aware that the fearful, *una voce* 'winter church' that had lasted for most of the previous half-century left little room for honest dialogue, particularly for a group of priests attempting to surface sensitive issues.

It wasn't a happy time. Pope Benedict XVI was continuing the restoration policies of Pope John II and memories were still fresh of the latter, now Saint John Paul II, wagging his finger in an unsaintly ticking-off gesture at a Nicaraguan Jesuit kneeling before him. It was an iconic moment. Bishops were ritually and publicly summoned to Rome for daring to mention not even to question the present imperative of celibacy for priests. Priests who pointed to the decline of Confessions and proposed what seemed viable and sensible reforms of the sacrament were contacted by their bishops who had been contacted by the papal nuncio who had been contacted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Strange people were appointed to key positions in the Vatican and wise heads ominously foretold – accurately as it turned out – the dreadful disasters that would ensue. And, as circumstances turned out, one of the group, Tony Flannery, would be silenced by the CDF effectively for little more than explaining in simple English some of the insights of modern biblical scholarship. He was reported apparently by the editor of a 'Catholic' newspaper worried about whether Irish Catholics would be able to cope with such knowledge. It wasn't a good time.

In such unpromising circumstances, the motley group gathered in Athlone wasn't quite sure what to do but the consensus was that we needed to do something. We could see the problems, but more importantly we believed we were prepared to name them. We sensed in a general, unfocused way that we should attempt to give the reforming impetus of the Second Vatican Council,

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almost successfully airbrushed out of popular memory, a second wind. What emerged was the formation of an association of priests committed to representing as many Irish priests as would choose to support us. We didn't expect or intend to represent all priests, though all priests were welcome to join.

We were aware that the National Conference of Priests of Ireland (NCPI), established by the Irish bishops as an official church body representing all priests, had died a slow and difficult death, ultimately I believe because, due to its provenance, it had lost the confidence of Irish priests. We thought we might attract a maximum of 200 members but were delighted to find that more than 1000 joined our ranks. The response encouraged us in our belief that, even though many priests were fearful and reluctant to have their names associated with us, over a third of Irish priests were happy that a few brave or foolish souls were prepared, in Ignatius McQuillan's telling phrase, 'to speak truth to power' (*The Furrow*, May, 2017).

Seven years on, the ACP has established a strong public profile, possibly due to our direct approach but also to the present palpable ineffectiveness of official Irish Catholic Church avenues of communications.

- We've earned and value the respect of our peers, not just our members but others who attend our gatherings, as with the present round of regional meetings on the well-being of Irish priests.
- We're respected for our support of priests in difficulty, those who have unacceptably crossed appropriate demarcation lines civilly and canonically but who remain our brother priests and who have a need of our care, especially when that's absent from a bishop or a diocese; and those innocent of allegations of criminality against them, like Fr Kevin Reynolds, whose legal representation we were happy to supply in his successful High Court case for defamation against an RTE television programme, 'Mission to Prey', in May 2011.
- We've become a voice (and a hope) – in some instances, as we are constantly reminded, the only voice and the only hope – for a growing constituency of lay people (excuse the term of diminishment), many of whom are drifting away from religious practice.
- We're at present, through a network of regional meetings, formulating a series of protocols to support priests and to defend their rights at threshold times of their lives and in particular to accompany priests in navigating the rigidity and inequity of some church structures.

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- We're attempting to assist priests who have been stepped down from active ministry for difficulties unrelated to sexual abuse but whose 'disappeared' existence is at the whim of a superior.
- Our web-site has achieved an extraordinary number of 'hits' and has become an effective platform of debate for Irish priests, as well as producing impressive liturgical resources that are used worldwide.
- We've established a successful networking with a web of Irish and international, clergy and other groups.
- And, though we say so ourselves, the leadership has received some kudos for our incisiveness, directness, commitment and resilience in publicising areas of crisis for Church and priesthood and in charting positive responses. An example was the focus placed on the vocations crisis – no priest, no eucharist; no eucharist, no church – now being echoed by individual bishops though they seem reluctant to draw obvious conclusions or even initiate a real debate.

### CRITICISM OF THE ACP

Apart from the support of our members and the general public the impression is sometimes given that priests who are non-members are less than happy with our association, apart from those non-members happy to access our support when trouble troubles them. We didn't expect to get a free-run in the Irish Church or to be unambiguously cherished by all sides. Inevitably, as our approach was direct and occasionally robust, as it needed to be, we've created a great deal of discomfort, embarrassment and sometimes opposition in different quarters. We predicted, for example, that some 'Catholic' newspapers, in an effort to protect their narrow constituencies and their commercial operations, would do what they could to depict us as raving radicals intent on damaging the Church – though many of our members have impressive CVs of loyalty and industry of up to and beyond 60 years service in the priesthood. And we weren't disappointed.

We were very disappointed, however, that our bishops made every effort to distance themselves from us, to exclude us and to diminish our effectiveness. We found it difficult actually to get a meeting with them, (that was before they decided they weren't going to meet us in any ongoing arrangement) though, in fairness, the tortuous structure of medieval arrangements for bishops' meetings may be partly to blame. In any case, it was clear that the intention was to sideline us, because we were an 'unofficial body and had no standing in canon law' though the national gathering of the chairmen of Councils of Priests, intended presumably to 'tick the box' of active consultation with priests in Ireland, doesn't seem

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to enjoy much of an official canonical pedigree either. In present circumstances, not listening to an association that represents a third of Irish priests because they have no standing in canon law is a bit like an official on the Titanic helping fearful passengers into life-boats and being asked if he was a fully paid up member of the Seaman's Union. On the positive side, the bishops' success in sidelining us has had the unintended effect of increasing our credibility.

Some priests, formed in an uncritical and unswerving loyalty to Mother Church, are uncomfortable with our perceived questioning of 'official' church teaching and structures. While most priests, Enneagram experts would contend, can be placed in the number 6 personality type category – with 'loyalty as their defining personality trait' – few are comfortable with Pope Francis' encouragement of 'debate, debate, debate' as the evidence of conflicting opinions is perceived as a diminishment of the authority of the Church. This is equivalent to the belief that whistle-blowers in the Garda Síochána have brought that organisation into disrepute. While that position achieved a certain credibility some time ago, few would argue that now in relation to the Catholic Church in Ireland, especially now that we know what Pope Francis' attitude is.

Other priests tell us that we should be prioritising more significant areas, that we need to direct our attention to wider issues, that we're too inward-looking, too narrow, too navel-gazing. Others again suggest more central issues – the importance of mission, the need for prayer in the lives of priests, youth ministry, to name but a few – and our usual response is that any one association can't do everything and it would be foolish to try. It is instructive, we hope, that among our members are priests who have made life-long contributions to 'mission' and to the prayer-life of Irish priests. So we are loth to be deflected from the platform we agreed seven years ago.

For other priests, the criticism (as above with Dominic) is about our perceived 'negativity', which of course is a personal judgement call but often is merely a way of criticising without actually explaining what the criticism means – though I don't tar Dominic with that particular brush. A charge of 'negativity' can be a dismissal technique rather than a prelude to a real engagement with specific issues. It may well, of course, disguise an unease with the tenor of debate but I've yet to hear a convincing unpacking of what 'negativity' means apart from someone implying their own discomfort with some of the issues we raise. Or possibly a discomfort with the robust style we sometimes employ. Or possibly too (even probably too) using the accusation of negativity as a stick to silence what we believe are justified criticisms of

church structures, policies and preferments. However, we remain convinced that a robust questioning and a particular focus, while they leave us open to the easy and sometimes facile charge of ‘negativity’, are effective and necessary tools in analysing what’s wrong and trenchantly proposing alternative positions or policies. It also needs to be said that, in the present situation where our parishes are haemorrhaging members and experts are using the word ‘trauma’ to describe our situation as a church (Kevin Egan, Cora Lambert, ‘Trauma in the Church, Naming the Symptoms’, *The Furrow*, June 2017) public figures have to face the real issues and accept the brickbats that come with that engagement rather than take refuge behind the shallow reassurances of hand-picked advisors who were chosen because they can be relied on NOT to speak the truth.

Other priests again, especially those who had particular reasons for maintaining the status quo – those who are part of a bishop’s inner circle or those with ambitions with a purple tinge – are conflicted by some of the things we say because even though their minds tell them that much of what we propose is sensible and necessary their ambitious hearts warn them not to be identified with a toxic association that might limit their chance of a promising invitation to the Navan Road. Clerical ambition, as Pope Francis keeps reminding us, is a significant problem in the church and it’s not confined to Rome.

After seven years the ACP has made significant progress and has successfully succeeded in deflecting efforts at different levels to encourage us to change our focus. While some may be happy to make the snowballs and let the ACP fire them, we’re aware of a debilitating fearfulness in the Irish Church, not least among clergy that we have to respect and allow for. For all sorts of reasons Irish clergy are extremely reluctant actually to say what they think, probably because, like the Garda Síochána, there’s no stomach for whistle-blowers in institutions where the future of its ‘junior’ members is so dependant on satisfying the needs of its senior officers.

It isn’t our intention to help jolly people up or to pretend that the emperor is always fully clothed. Yes, we can be accused of having a narrow vista but we make no apology for choosing our ground and we won’t be deflected from it.

The simple truth is that the work of the ACP should be supported and resourced not patronised and diminished because if human kind has learned anything from its history, it surely is the equivalent of knowing that if you try to keep the lid on a pot on a raging fire something eventually is going to give.