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Pat Collins

A letter to the Irish Bishops

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Your Most Reverend Excellencies the Archbishops and bishops of Ireland, in this letter I desire to raise two important issues which I believe are in urgent need of your attention. Both of them are concerned with the lives and ministry of priests. Firstly, there is a growing pastoral requirement to appoint trained exorcists in each of our dioceses. Secondly there is a need to conduct the national mission for bishops, priests and religious, which was called for, in 2012, by Pope Benedict XVI in his letter to the Irish Church.

THE NEED FOR TRAINED EXORCISTS

I was ordained a priest in 1971. Ever since I have been travelling, preaching and ministering to people, not only here in Ireland, but also in many foreign countries. While I have witnessed wonderful things in the course of my travels, I have also observed a growing apostasy, which involves more and more people drifting away from the Christian faith. As this has happened, there has been increasing evidence of the malicious activity of the evil one. Prof Cascioli, who lectures on the exorcist course in *Regina Apostolorum* university in Rome, said recently, “There is a broad spread of superstitious practices, and with that a growing number of requests for help from people who are directly or indirectly afflicted by evil.” I can confirm what the Professor says. Nearly every day of the year I receive an email or phone call from desperate people who feel oppressed by evil spirits or who believe that their home or workplace is haunted in one way or another.

In a homily which he delivered on the 4 October 2014 Pope Francis said, “Maybe some of you might say: ‘But Father, how old fashioned you are to speak about the devil in the 21st century!’ But look out because the devil is present! The devil is here... even in the 21st century! And we mustn’t be naïve, right? *We must learn from the Gospel how to fight against Satan* (my italics).” Speaking to priest participants in a Course on the Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary in 2017, Pope Francis made this observation, “Discernment is necessary because those

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who approach the confessional may come from the most desperate situations ... When the confessor becomes aware of the presence of genuine spiritual disturbances – that may be in large part psychic, and therefore must be confirmed by means of healthy collaboration with the human sciences – *he must not hesitate to refer the issue to those who, in the diocese, are charged with this delicate and necessary ministry, namely, exorcists. But these must be chosen with great care and great prudence* (my italics).” So it is not surprising to find that in 2014 Pope Francis gave formal recognition to the International Association of Exorcists, a group of 250 priests spread across 30 countries who exercise the ministry of exorcism. Aware of the growing demand for exorcisms many bishops in countries such as Italy, Spain, Poland and Britain have increased the number of trained exorcists in their dioceses. In 2017 the United States Catholic Conference of bishops published an English language version of the 1998 rite of exorcism entitled, *Exorcisms and Related Supplications*. While the need for solemn exorcism is rare, there is a much more widespread requirement for deliverance ministry, which is sometimes referred to as simple exorcism.

Consequently, there is a need for one or two priests in every diocese to be trained as ministers of deliverance and, if necessary, of solemn exorcism. That training would need to include inputs on a wide range of topics such as abnormal psychology, methods of praying in a discerning and effective way, and suggestions on how to cleanse a place which seems to be haunted by spirits etc. Dioceses need to form exorcism teams which include a trained priest/s (cf. canon 1172 of the *Code of Canon Law*), a sympathetic psychologist/psychiatrist, and some experienced lay people. Bishops also need to draw up ethical guidelines and protocols to be observed when priests and/or lay people engage in deliverance prayer or exorcism.

To the best of my knowledge there are very few, if any, trained, officially appointed exorcists in Ireland. It breaks my heart to acknowledge this, because it means that there are so many afflicted people who having had recourse to the Church for help, end up feeling let down and abandoned. When the majority of priests are consulted by a person who claims to be spiritually oppressed or possessed, they tend to feel ill-equipped to help them. If they encourage the afflicted people to contact the bishop’s office for help, they often get little or no professional assistance. As a result they are often referred on to the few people in the country who have a reputation, rightly or wrongly, for being able to deal with such cases. Surely every diocese has an evangelical and pastoral duty to have exorcism teams in order to help those who are

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oppressed or possessed by evil spirits? It is significant that when Jesus commissioned the apostles to go and preach the gospel, he said to them, “these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons” (Mk 16:17). It would seem therefore, that deliverance from evil spirits was one of the principal signs of the coming of the kingdom. You, our bishops, have made great progress in the area of safeguarding children and vulnerable adults. But surely the time has come to make an equally conscientious effort to deliver and protect people from the malicious and destructive activity of the enemy of our souls.

THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL MISSION

When Samuel said to God, “Speak Lord your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3:10) he received a message for Eli the priest. Because it was forbidding Samuel was reluctant to speak it, but Eli urged him to do so. So Samuel told him about God’s dissatisfaction on account of his failure to administer a stern rebuke to his priestly sons Hophni and Phinehas who had scandalized the people (cf. 1 Sam 2:23). Apparently, he had only gently chided them for their illicit behaviour, such as appropriating the best portion of the temple sacrifices for themselves, and having illicit sexual relations with the sanctuary’s serving women. Although the character of Eli was sincere and devout, he seemed to have been lacking in firmness because of human respect.

Eli’s failure was not unlike the way in which some Irish bishops and religious superiors also failed to deal adequately with the sinful crimes of their priestly colleagues. When Pope Benedict wrote his letter to the Irish Church in 2010 he said among other things, “I have been deeply disturbed by the information which has come to light regarding the abuse of children and vulnerable young people by members of the Church in Ireland, particularly by priests and religious. I can only share in the dismay and the sense of betrayal that so many of you have experienced on learning of these sinful and criminal acts and the way Church authorities in Ireland dealt with them.” Later, addressing the bishops he said, “It cannot be denied that some of you and your predecessors failed, at times grievously, to apply the long-established norms of canon law to the crime of child abuse. Serious mistakes were made in responding to allegations.” He added that there was, “a misplaced concern for the reputation of the Church and the avoidance of scandal.”

Later in his letter, Pope Benedict added, “I propose that a nationwide Mission be held for all bishops, priests and religious. It is my hope that, by drawing on the expertise of experienced preachers and retreat-givers from Ireland and from elsewhere, and by exploring anew the conciliar documents, the liturgical

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rites of ordination and profession, and recent pontifical teaching, you will come to a more profound appreciation of your respective vocations, so as to rediscover the roots of your faith in Jesus Christ and to drink deeply from the springs of living water that he offers you through his Church.”

Five years have passed since the Pope wrote to the Irish Church, and nevertheless there has been no response that I am aware of. Not only is this surprising, it is profoundly disappointing and disturbing. Surely, the Pope is Christ’s vicar on earth. To ignore what he says is tantamount to ignoring the word of the Lord. If you, the bishops, fail to implement the Pope’s proposal, how can you expect Irish Catholics to respond to your teaching and instructions, e.g., on child safeguarding or the subject of abortion? It is my hope and prayer that even now you would agree to organize the national mission called for by Pope Benedict.

CONCLUSION

When I sent this letter to his Excellency Archbishop Thaddeus Okolo, the Papal Nuncio, he graciously replied by saying, “Sincerely, I have been thinking almost in the same direction – how to help organize an intensive mission, at a national level. Something that would involve mainly priests and bishops. A sort of nationwide motivational campaign to raise awareness, spiritual awareness, a new beginning.”

Dear brothers of the Irish Episcopal Conference, perhaps it is presumptuous of me to write as I have done. But believe me when I say that, I feel impelled by the Spirit to say these things. As I have prayed and sought God’s will over the last two years, I have received many inspirations, especially from the Old Testament, about the shortcomings of the clergy and how the Lord is appealing for a change of heart and a transformation of mind and behaviour.

Your brother in Christ,
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