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Kevin Hegarty

Irish Catholicism:
Will it survive?
Does it matter?

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Thank you for your welcome. Thanks for coming to this seminar. I speak to you with some trepidation. May I explain.

It is an afternoon in the west of Ireland in the drowsy 1950's. The clerical retreat for the diocese of Killala has just started in St Muredach's College, overlooking the Moy river in Ballina. The soutanned retreat director has swanned in to the diocesan hall where the priests have gathered. He launches into the opening paragraphs of a turgid theological treatise, coated in pious platitudes.

Among his listeners is Canon James Kilgallon. As a British army chaplain in the first World War he witnessed horrors of which he rarely spoke. It left him immune to the prissy pomposities of triumphal Irish catholicism and honed his laconic wit. "What a small man they are making of Jesus", was his regular response to some church rules. Kilgallon notices that a colleague continues to toy with his hearing aid as the lecturer ploughs on. From the back row he whispers audibly "Don't waste your batteries, Andy. He is no good"

So I come before you aware of the above warning. I am neither a theologian or a sociologist, prophet or soothsayer, As a priest in a parish in the west of Ireland I am merely a hod carrier for the kingdom. About 30 years ago a papal nuncio to Ireland put people like me in our place. At a meeting with the president of the National Conference of Priests to discuss how priests might be involved in the consultation for the appointment of bishops, the nuncio told him he was a nobody leading a group of nobodies.

The only authority I have to speak on today's topic is that I have spent 37 years labouring in what is often called the vineyard. I am often amused by the clerical custom of disguising reality in biblical clichés. I have spent my ministry in the barony of Erris, the windswept peninsula in North West Mayo. It is a landscape of austere and awesome beauty. However only global warming of seismic proportions will create a vineyard around Erris Head.

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Priesting on the periphery has the advantage of protecting one from the dangerous allure of group think at the centre. There is an independent strand in west of Ireland catholicism where I find myself at home. It includes such people as Archbishop John MacHale of Tuam who opposed the doctrine of papal infallibility at the first Vatican Council, Fr Patrick Lavelle, the patriot priest of Partry and more recently Dr Enda Mc Donagh, the renowned Mayo theologian, who, for many of us, has been a light in the stygian gloom of much of Irish Catholic theology.

Today's seminar asks the question whether Irish catholicism will survive. In its long history it has experienced triumph and failure, resurgence and decline, ruin and restoration. Only a foolish bookmaker, an oxymoron if there was ever one, would give favourable odds on its demise. I am convinced, however, that the present model of Irish catholicism, which reached its zenith in the 1950's is collapsing. Long gone are the days when students trooped in droves to seminaries with, in the words of the late Fr Liam Ryan, Professor of Sociology at Maynooth, "their umbilical cords intact looking for somewhere to plug them in."

One does not have to be a forensic accountant to discern its predicament from the facts. I will refrain from giving you a morass of statistics on church attendance and vocation decline that all point to the one conclusion. Even the smoothest PR guru would find it impossible to mask or massage the reality. I will confine myself to one example from the situation I know best in the diocese of Killala, in North Mayo and west Sligo where there are 22 parishes. There is only one priest under the age of 40, two under 50, five under 60, nine under 70. Seven priests will retire in the next three years when they reach the retirement age of 75. Only two priests have been ordained in the last 17 years. The diocese has not had a student for the priesthood since 2013.

For years catholic leaders have turned a blind eye to the elephant in the sacristy as the number of available clergy remained high. They should have gone to Specsavers, for he is now trampling on the furniture.

So the big decline in church attendance and a collapse in vocations testify to a model of church in severe crisis. It is, I venture to suggest, worth looking at how the present model developed in order to discern why it is lost in today's world.

What we call traditional Irish catholicism is a product of the 19th century. The Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 gave the church a tremendous psychological boost as it emerged from the catacomb experience of the Penal Laws. In the following century 24 cathedrals and over 3,000 churches were built.

The priest's people ratio improved after 1850 due to the

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increased number of vocations and a population decimated by famine and emigration. The growth of female religious orders was even more striking. In 1800 there were only 120 nuns in Ireland. As the 20th century dawned there were 8,000. Religious institutions were founded with such frequency that the Mayo novelist George Moore commented “that nothing thrives in Ireland like a convent, a public house and a race meeting.”

The Council of Trent, held between 1545 and 1563, as a response to the reformation, provided the template for the catholic church in the centuries that followed. It promulgated a church, based on the parish structure, rigorously controlled under the discipline of Rome. Due to our febrile history tridentine rule was slow coming to Ireland.

The emergence of a strong tridentine church in Ireland in the 19th Century is the particular achievement of Cardinal Paul Cullen. A native of Kildare, he spent all his student and priestly life in Rome before his appointment as archbishop in Ireland in 1849. Austere, dour and a gifted administrator, he was suspicious of Irish customs and in thrall to the Roman way. I suggest that in the long history of Irish catholicism no Irish cleric has had as strong an influence with the Vatican curia. He found a catholic community, haunted by the trauma of the Great Famine, amenable to strict church control and open to pious continental devotions. In an episcopate of almost 30 years he shaped a church that was strictly disciplined, theologically and spiritually acquiescent, politically powerful and a major player in education and health care.

Cardinal Cullen’s tridentine temple strengthened in the years after the establishment of the Irish state in 1922. The partition of the country increased the power of the church. It no longer had a rival that came close to matching its power. Ironically, unionists helped ensure what they feared about an independent Ireland by their absence.

As a renaissance cathedral was created within the austere lines of the magnificent Cordoba mosque, catholic leaders developed a kind of theocracy inside a democratic state. Catholic teaching on divorce, contraception and the censorship of literature crept into our laws and constitution. John Mc Gahern commented that “it was as if suddenly the heavenly word of eternity had been placed on the twenty six counties, and the new class that had done well out of independence.”

The church had its achievements in education and health care but they were overshadowed by the oppressive atmosphere. Brian Moore, the novelist, telescoped this cultural climate when he wrote, in an ironic parody of the start of John’s gospel, that “In the beginning was the word and the word was no.”

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It was a time when authority hardened into authoritarianism, charism slid into control and humility mutated into hubris.

Cardinal Cullen's temple was a shaky edifice. It exuded what Professor Liam Ryan once called "the four deadly sins-an obsession with sexual morality, clerical authoritarianism, anti-intellectualism or at best non-intellectualism and a ghetto mentality". Symbolic of its intellectual insecurity was the bishops insistence in 1908 that the new national university should not have a theological faculty. Theology was to be the preserve of the clerical elite in the controlled arena of the seminary. A country with the highest level of catholic church attendance in Western Europe lacked a critical theological and philosophical tradition that might have critiqued and enriched pastoral experience.

In his poem "Annus Mirabilis", Philip Larkin detected significant social change in England between "the end of the Chatterley ban and the Beatles first LP."

In these years modernity also pitched its camp in Ireland. Seán Lemass abandoned the futile pursuit of deValera's arcadian vision and opened the country to foreign investment and industry. The advent of RTE television in 1962 helped end what Professor Tom Inglis has called the long 19th century of Irish catholicism. Feminism began to enter Irish popular consciousness. In 1973 we entered what is now the European Union. Pop music started to dominate the air waves. With a stroke of his ministerial pen, Donagh O'Malley changed Ireland by providing free second level education. Supreme Court Judges discerned rights in the constitution that Eamonn deValera or Archbishop McQuaid never dreamed of. Even in the church there were new stirrings evident in the second Vatican Council. Irish catholic leaders had carefully protected priests and people from the theological ferment in post 2 nd World War Europe. The bishops returned from the council bewildered and sought to retrieve in their episcopal palaces the tranquillity they had lost in Rome.

And then the chamber of horrors in the basement of Irish catholicism was prised open to reveal a gruesome pandora's box-industrial schools, the Magdalene laundries, the mother and baby homes, the clerical sexual abuse of children, the cover ups and the casuistic mental reservations. So began a decline of the present model of Irish catholicism that is as spectacular as its rise.

Social change loosened the stranglehold of clerical authoritarianism in Ireland. Church leaders in Ireland and throughout the developed world are inclined to blame secularisation for their woes. They fail to recognise that secularisation has helped create positive social and economic change. It has brought intellectual freedom and personal liberation. They seem to have forgotten that

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the second Vatican Council promised respectful dialogue with the modern world.

The Church is divided between conservatives who crave the return of the old certainties and liberals who long for reform. Hope for reform now rests on the frail shoulders of Pope Francis. He has shown an openness to change after the authoritarian papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. He faces strong opposition from sections of the curia who oppose his initiatives. Reforming the curia, it has been said, is like trying to give a haircut to a drowsy lion.

The 19th century poet and critic, Matthew Arnold, once wrote of wandering between two worlds, one dead, and the other powerless to be born. That, to me, is where the church is at today. Some years ago, the psychologist, Maureen Gaffney wrote a perceptive article in *The Irish Times* that telescopes the church's predicament; "Consider the list of issues the church has failed to deal with credibly since the 1960s; premarital and extramarital sex; remarriage; contraception; divorce; homosexuality; the role of women in ministry and women's ordination; and the celibacy of the clergy. All have to do with sexuality. The sexual revolution, particularly the development of effective contraception, and the growth of the women's and gay rights movements, has left the church stranded with an archaic psychology of sexuality. The world has moved decisively away from a view of sex as simply procreation. What preoccupies men and women in the modern world is trying to understand the psychological roots of their own sexuality; how it is formed; how central it is to their identity and sense of self; and probably most essentially, how it can make or break their relationships."

She argues that church leaders "must confront the root cause of the problem that the catholic church is a powerful homosocial institution, where men are submissive to a hierarchical authority and where women are incidental and dispensable. It's the purest form of a male hierarchy, reflected in the striking fact that we all collectively refer to it as "the Hierarchy".

It has all the characteristics of the worst kind of such an institution; rigid in social structure; preoccupied by power; ruthless in suppressing internal dissent; in thrall to status, titles, and insignia, with an accompanying culture of narcissism and entitlement; and at a great psychological distance from human intimacy and suffering.

Most strikingly, it is a culture which is fearful and disdainful of women. As theologian William M Shea observes, "fear of women, and perhaps hatred of them, may well be just what we have to work out of the catholic system".

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I agree largely with the above analysis. The church's ordination ban on female ordination is misogyny, parading as theological abstraction.

For many its teaching on sexuality, especially on contraception and homosexuality, have as much validity as Danny Healy Rae's theological treatise on climate change. Fifty years ago this week Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae* which condemned contraception. I believe that Dr Garrett Fitzgerald was right when he claimed that this encyclical undermined the church's authority. People began to lose confidence in an institution whose teaching on this subject was so out of sync with their lived experience.

What should the church do now? It is easy to offer advice. There is an old fable where the hippo falls in love with a butterfly. He seeks advice from the wise owl who tells him that he must become a butterfly if he is to be lucky in love. The hippo tramps away happily until he realises that the owl has not told him how to achieve this. Back he goes to the owl who dismisses him saying; "I only outline policy, I do not implement".

Aware of this caveat, may I conclude by saying that until the church confronts issues like its hierarchical structure, celibacy, female ordination and its theology on sexuality, it will continue to decline into irrelevance. What is needed I believe is a new council of the church to map out a paradigm for the future. It might be a moment when in the words of Seamus Heaney, hope and history rhyme.

Structural change. If we accept unjust structures we cease to be neutral, but when we accept our responsibility to change sinful structures that is a radical moment of grace. Pope Francis has proclaimed the Gospel in a way that is appropriate both to our world and to a culture that is radically changing. He is uncompromisingly supportive of the poor.

– MARY MCALEESE et al, *Five Years to Save the Irish Church* (Dublin: Columba Press) p.54.