

Morality Gone Mad

By **John Quinn MSc IT** - Published on March 12th, 2010

MORALITY is a set of standards of conduct that are generally accepted as right or proper. It is therefore, incredible that the chief custodian of the moral standard, the Catholic Church is still in denial in the aftermath of sexual abuse crimes perpetrated against children of the Dublin Archdiocese. Observing the Bishops, as recently as last Wednesday, in a press conference claiming that the church has been unfairly singled out for criticism is bizarre in the extreme. Other institutions to the Bishop's way of thinking, for example the family institution, are equally complicit but are escaping the same media and public wrath. Other aspects of the press conference were also disquieting. The Bishops claim that a voice for the victims was in some way a gift from the church is disingenuous at best. In reality, the victims had to confront and overcome the considerable intellectual and legal might that the church could and did throw at them before their voice could finally be heard.

"A casualty of all this has been the truth," the Bishop of Clogher, Joseph Duffy, told reporters at the recent Irish seminary in Rome. Whether or not Bishop Duffy realises it; a bigger causality could be the church itself as it grapples with a dwindling though loyal congregation and a chronic shortage of priests.

In that much publicised Bishops meeting with the Pope in Rome, excerpts of which were televised on RTE, one couldn't but be struck by the surreal nature of it all. There was a group of elderly men comfortable in the grandeur and traditions of a passé institution dressed in ornate robes and persisting with the archaic practice of kissing the Papal ring. It was easy to deduce that these men have a primeval instinct to first preserve this institution rather than confronting or apologising for the suffering of their victims. The taking out of insurance by dioceses around the country to cover them against allegations of clerical sex abuse is further evidence if any were needed that their priority is to preserve this institution above all else.

Of all the main players involved in the cover up, Archbishop Desmond Connell's role merits special attention.

Under his leadership of the Archdiocese, the unremitting refusal to admit any liability only added to the hurt and grief suffered by the abuse victims. His announcement that the Dublin Archdiocese had never paid compensation to any victim of clerical child abuse was proven false when it emerged that compensation was paid to Andrew Madden for the abuse by Fr Ivan Payne. The second most powerful cleric in the country had undermined the very moral code that he had vowed to protect by lying and obstructing justice for the victims.

Ireland in addition to being renowned as a major exporter of food, software and pharmaceuticals would regrettably become known too for the export of clerical abusers. The Boston based group, bishopaccountability.org have gathered and intend to publish the names of seventy Irish priests whom the church there has accepted have abused children. These priests some of whom came straight out of the seminary were exported from Ireland to the US and became someone else's problem.

It seems that the Catholic Church has been losing its moral authority for some time now. Fr Michael Cleary and Bishop Eamon Casey are two examples who by their actions undermined the moral authority of the church.

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Celibacy whatever one might think of its merits is a commitment to remain unmarried and to refrain entirely from sexual relations. The hypocrisy of Cleary in particular was breathtaking. In public - a vocal advocate of conservative church teaching on contraception and marriage. In private – he was a father of two children, with his housekeeper Phyllis Hamilton. Bishop Casey was no respecter of this moral code either having fathered a son with divorcee Annie Murphy. It is amazing to think that these two men were the principal cheerleaders for the Papal visit to Ireland in the 1970s.

The Catholic Church continues to reel from further accusations of clerical sex abuse and this time, it is closer to the birthplace of the Pope himself. A private Jesuit school in Berlin whose motto is *“Give us the child for seven years and we will give you the man.”* is at the centre of a child sex abuse scandal that dates back to the 1950s. Widespread allegations of child abuse are also being investigated in Bonn, Göttingen, Hanover and Hamburg. Should the new school motto be *“Do unto others whatever thou want for as long as thou canst get away with it”*?

The Catholic Church role of moral superior is compromised not from the threat of any competing organisation but from the self inflicted damage caused by the actions of its leaders. The press conference of last Wednesday, the Bishops meeting with the Pope and the general mismanagement of the child abuse scandal has been a disaster for the church.

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It is difficult to see where they can go from here in terms of creating a more positive image of the institution. For a start, I believe more contemporary behaviour than kissing rings, fancy dress, using misnomers like the Holy See and attending conclaves is badly needed. This is not a panacea for all its failings but it would be a good starting point to show the public that the church is serious about reclaiming lost ground. A failure to act will not just lose its appeal to potential new members but risk losing the loyalty of a dwindling congregation and will further exacerbate the chronic shortage of priests.

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