What Happened to Catholic Ireland: An Irish-American Historian's View

By John P. McCarthy

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I first came to Ireland more than a half-century ago. At the time I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, having received my bachelor's degree from Fordham University in New York, a Jesuit institution, and my secondary education at Loughlin High School in Brooklyn, run by the Brothers of the Christian Schools, or the De La Salle Brothers.

The United States had just elected its first Catholic as President, although he had gone to great pains to make clear that he would be "a Catholic who was President, not a Catholic President." Not too much was made of his remarks at the time, other than to note that it seemed to reassure a number of Protestant ministers who were apprehensive about a Catholic becoming President.

Remarkably, today many of the same type of ministers are closely allied with the American Catholic hierarchy in opposing an absolutist secularist agenda that not only inhibits religious influence in the public square, but threatens to demand behaviour contrary to specific religious beliefs.

Back then American Catholicism abounded with confidence based on church attendance and religious vocation figures. Eminent Catholic commentators like John Courtney Murray, S.J., and Christopher Dawson considered American constitutional institutions as compatible with medieval concepts of separation of political and ecclesiastical

power and preferable to established church notions common to Europe, and that America might be the basis for a revitalized Christendom

I shared the same enthusiasm about the role Catholicism was coming to have in an earlier hostile United States. Naturally when coming to Ireland I was fascinated to land in a society that was impregnated with Catholicism.

While Catholicism was not the officially established religion, Irish society was overwhelming Catholic. The Angelus was played on the public radio; priests, brothers, and nuns wore their distinctive habits in public places; passengers in buses would invariably bless themselves when the bus was passing a church; and Masses and other church services were usually very crowded. Days of obligation had almost the aura of public holidays as many businesses and schools were closed.

I distinctly remember the wife of an older cousin (both she and he were national teachers), upon hearing that I attended the University of Chicago, asking me about "the morals" of the students there. Her remarks came back strikingly more than a decade later when I noticed condom machines in the men's room of the student union building at UCD, something still not present at Fordham, even though the number of Jesuits has diminished and the majority of the faculty are non-Catholic.

Back in 1961 I admittedly found the prevailing Catholic orthodoxy somewhat uncomfortable – not because I dissented from it, but because I was used to Catholic orthodoxy being a minority position. I sensed a lack of serious intellectual thought about religious issues that confrontation with opposing views would have stimulated. There was piety and obedience in abundance, but a lack of thoughtfulness.

Although conservative in my religious and social perspective, even as an unmarried student in an America that was on the eve of the academic madness that swept the country in the 1960's, I was inclined to be a bit more outspoken and challenging while in Ireland. For example, when having lunch with a local Canon and his curate in County Kerry I was "cheeky" enough to warn them that my impressions of Irish clergymen had been set by my reading of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Honor Tracey's *The Straight and Narrow.*

In reality my encounters with them and other priests were very positive. I came to take with a grain of salt the accounts I heard from older people in rural Kerry about the priests breaking up crossroad and house dances in the 1930's and later. I came to suspect that a fear of the clergy and of teachers might be partly the consequence of a peasant mind-set wary, originally of landlords, but also of the priests and the teachers, who made up a large portion of the very small number of the population having more than a secondary education. In fact, at time even those with secondary education were a minority.

How different the more casual attitudes toward the clergy beginning in the late 1970's and early 80's. Significantly, these changed attitudes preceded the revelations of clerical sex abuse. Since then, among many, casualness has been transformed into outright hostility.

But even before the revelations, religion was becoming less relevant for a great number. Their faith was drying up, which conditioned them for the changed atmosphere that was to come.

Thirty years ago parents began to be untroubled by the less inhibited behaviour of their children, including sexual behaviour. They were glad their youngsters were not being subjected to what they claimed had been forced on themselves by the priests, the nuns, and the teachers. Those parents had been students when I first came to Ireland. At that time I scarcely got the impression that they were being intimidated by the priests, especially since Ireland had entered into the Era of the Ballroom of Romance and the Showbands.

Much later thought and study on my part about the obedient and devout Catholicism of mid-Twentieth Century Ireland has made me wonder whether a certain amount of devotion could have been attributed to an unhealthy linking of religion and nationalism. For some their unquestioning and even aggressive Catholicism might have been an expression of Irishness, much like enthusiasm for the national sports.

Along the same lines, Church leaders could be faulted for having rested on the soft deference they received from society and state in a quasi-established position.

Another factor was a simplistic Irish moral self-confidence resulting from neutrality during the Second World War. The strict censorship imposed by the government on what was happening outside of Ireland was understandable. The authorities were concerned that

popular enthusiasm for any belligerents could endanger neutrality. There was special anxiety about possible sympathy for one belligerent in particular. Fortunately that did not arise, as was confirmed by the thousands of Irish who served in the British forces during the war.

But that censorship and neutrality gave the Irish a sense of innocence and naiveté in contrast to the rest of the world. One manifestation of the same was the Government's hopeless attempt after the war and at the outset of the Cold War to gain worldwide sympathy to end the partition of Ireland. That was at a time when millions of people elsewhere had been displaced from their homes and nations.

Ireland emerged from provincial isolation in the 1960's and 1970's thanks to economic modernization and free trade, admission to the United Nations and later the Common Market, expanded secondary and third level educational opportunities, and television.

Eamon de Valera, President by this time, was witnessing the self-sufficient isolation he had idealized being reversed by his successors and party followers. In 1962, with a then unappreciated prophetic insight, he commented at the opening of the Irish national television service on its marvels as a new instrument of communication, but also noted its comparable capacity to do harm.

Naturally historians of modern Ireland celebrate television's having brought into the public forum issues that earlier had been limited to the confessional, the psychiatrist's chair, and, no doubt, locker room banter. The reservations of some clergy and bishops about such openness made them the object of scorn.

No doubt those clerics were picking the wrong fight. The problem was not the discussion of certain topics on the air, but the ultimate imbalance and even, as was more recently borne out, outright fraud in anti-clerical presentations. Maybe even more disturbing was not the liberalization, but the *libertine-ization*, of the airwaves, particularly the less serious fare, such as soaps, comedies, and even commercials, which probably have had a greater effect on the consciousness of the popular mind than serious discussion programs.

The outbreak of trouble in Northern Ireland prompted a revision of thought about partition and as well as a growth in sensitivity toward the Protestant minority in the Republic.

It was a long learning process, beginning with Conor Cruise O'Brien's *States of Ireland*, through Garret FitzGerald's, *Toward a New Ireland*, the Sunningdale Agreement, the Hillsborough Agreement, and finally, for those whom Seamus Mallon correctly labelled "slow learners", the Good Friday Agreement. Ultimately most came to accept the reality that it was the existence of two identities on the island rather than British perfidy that was the reason for partition.

Naturally some of the revisionists jumped to the conclusion that Northern Unionists would be more accommodating to political unification were the Republic to shed its Catholic flavour. In fact, most Unionists were indifferent to church-state relations within the Republic, being concerned only that Northern Ireland not be incorporated into the Republic.

This did not mean that it was not appropriate to remove the purely symbolic reference in the constitution recognizing the majority and minority religious faiths, a move receiving the approval of the then primate, Cardinal Conway.

On the whole the historic record of the Free State and its successor Republic toward its minority Protestant community was good. Generous care was taken to insure that the national schools that were Protestant survived and terms of public assistance to Protestant secondary schools was and is more generous than what Catholic fee schools receive. Until the Celtic Tiger, Protestants were disproportionately present in senior positions in banking, management, and law. Some would suggest, not entirely tongue-in-check, that the decline of a strong Protestant ethic presence in Irish banking explains a lot of the difficulties of recent times.

However, Irish Protestants did have memories of atrocities committed against some of their numbers by Irish rebels during the War for Independence. The significant emigration of Protestants in the opening years of Irish independence was partly a consequence of that. There were a number of disturbing instances in subsequent years, including objections to a Protestant being county librarian in Mayo, the boycott over a mixed-marriage couple in Fethard on the Sea in Wexford, and the non-attendance of senior political figures at the funeral service for the first Irish President, Douglas Hyde, in a Protestant church.

These were outrageous and ridiculous, but were prompted by the same bitter historical memories that explain some Orange and Loyalist antics about the same time.

The Catholic hierarchy denied Catholics the opportunity to attend the most internationally renowned university in the country, Trinity College, up until 1972 because it was not Catholic. But at the same time the ostensibly Catholic universities in Dublin, Cork, and Galway, were well on their way toward secularization. Today Trinity students are as overwhelmingly "Catholic", in the ethnic rather than religious sense, as the other universities. Such is also the case at Queen's in Belfast, which at the time of the Irish Universities legislation of the earlier Twentieth Century was assumed to be the Protestant College in the same way that UCD, UCC, and UCG were Catholic.

These developments parallel what has happened in a great number of the Catholic universities in the United States. They have become Catholic in the same way that many of the Ivy League schools were Protestant, that is, their character at their founding. For various reasons -- to draw students, to impress sympathetic parents, and to appease alumni -- these schools continue to call themselves Catholic, or label themselves by the name of the religious order that had founded them. For instance, Jesuit universities identify themselves as the Jesuit University of the city where located.

Another parallel in both the Irish and American churches was an enthusiastic misinterpretation of the Second Vatican Council. Freewheeling liturgical experimentation and blunt challenges to episcopal authority were not as open here. But there was among the ordinary clergy and religious, not to mention the laity, a mixture of passivity and thoughtless acceptance of change as well as an increasing assumption that all most anything was permissible.

One area where this was evident was the individualization of the hitherto communal life of religious orders, which has contributed in no small way to the diminution in their numbers. Another was in church architecture where structures more and more assumed the character of gymnasia, meeting halls, or modernized replicas of Newgrange.

This spirit was most disastrous in the dilution of religious instruction. There was a passive assumption that children were receiving proper catechetical instruction in the schools

under Catholic management. So long as the First Communion and Confirmation exercises were conducted everyone seemed content, with little thought as to the content or depth of religious instruction or encouragement of religious devotion.

One cannot help but suspect that what has happened can be partly attributed to the lack of serious religious faith on the part of many instructors. Children in the lower elementary classes are now the third generation experiencing this sad dilution. Even though Catholic management might continue in a greater number of schools than would please the Minister of Education, it will scarcely get to the root of the problem.

Unlike fifty years ago, where Irish youngsters instinctively blessed themselves when passing a church or knelt at their bedsides saying their night prayers, one wonders how many of the present youngsters can name the Seven Sacraments or can recite the Ten Commandments, not to mention attend Sunday Mass with any regularity.

The lessening of religious sensitivity, the growth of indifference, and the actual loss of faith occurred almost unawares. It was unlike what happens when an overtly hostile political regime imposes restrictions on religion, such as in Eastern Europe right after the war.

In fact, leaders of the Irish Church had an unwarranted sense of confidence in the late 70's and early 80's because of certain events. Among them were the enthusiastic reception by the Irish to the first ever Papal visit by John Paul II in 1979, the overwhelming approval given in the 1983 referendum to the anti-abortion amendment to the Irish constitution, and the comparable-sized rejection in a referendum three years later of a proposed amendment to allow divorce.

Some might have deluded themselves into being reassured of the faith of most Irish by the enthusiasm with which so many Irish went on pilgrimages to Medjugorje**.** Why Knock or Lourdes would not have sufficed always baffled me? However, I also realize, if for no other reason than having read *The Canterbury Tales*, that some go on pilgrimages with other than supernatural motives.

Another popular enthusiasm, scarcely enhancing the standing of religious belief, was the fascination of many with the so-called moving statute of the Blessed Virgin at Ballinspittle in Cork. But unfortunately a more accurate meter of public interest in religion

was the popular reception for the television comedy character, Father Ted, in which the village priest appeared more the simpleton than the tyrant.

Sure enough, within a decade of the "Church victories" in the 1983 and 1986 referenda, things turned quickly the other way. The first crack in the so-called clerical dominance was the "X" case decision by the Supreme Court in early 1992 allowing an abortion in a case where the expectant mother was threatening suicide, and basing the decision on the very wording of the right to life amendment itself about the equal right to life of the mother.

That decision gave validity to the apprehension of some opponents of the original amendment. They had argued that rather than copper-fasten restriction against abortion, it might allow grounds to do just the opposite. Given the capacity of jurists to be quite imaginative in coming to decisions, there seems to have been some validity to such fears.

Later that year three questions were put to the electorate: one to allow the distribution of information about abortion, the second to permit freedom to travel abroad to obtain an abortion, and a third excluding threatened suicide as grounds for abortion. The first two liberalizing measures passed, receiving about three-fifths of the vote, while the latter, a restriction on abortion, was rejected by almost two-thirds of the voters.

A further attempt in 2002 by constitutional amendment to reverse the "X" decision also failed, but by a much closer vote. Part of the negative vote was from "Right to Life" supporters who wanted even stricter wording.

In 1992 the Bishop of Galway resigned when it became known that he had fathered a child while Bishop of Kerry.

In 1995, by a margin of less than 51%, a constitutional amendment allowing divorce was approved in a referendum. The champions of divorce argued that its occurrence would be rare, but that it was necessary to regularize the status of couples, especially for the sake of their children, who had previous marriages that had not been dissolved, or of couples one or both of whose earlier marriage had been annulled by the Catholic Church but not by the state.

Some commentators, including yours truly appearing on the American Public Broadcasting network, argued that the outcome was the beginning of the slippery slope by

which Ireland would move toward a California life style. Statistics on increased marital breakdown, as well as increased cohabitation, would bear out such apprehensions.

The next decade and a half would be a long night of the soul for the Catholic Church in Ireland in view of the numerous revelations and accusations of sexual abuse by priests and religious in parishes, schools, and, especially, industrial homes, and hierarchical lack of concern. Public commissions confirmed the reality of the abuse and the state established a mechanism for financial retribution to those, such as orphaned or delinquent children, who had been placed in the industrial schools run by religious orders at the behest of and with the financial aid of the state.

Of the final cost for the redress of over a billion euros only a small fraction was drawn from the religious orders. This greatly annoyed those anxious to punish the Church. However, fury at the Church's not bearing a greater portion of the cost seems to have abated when the taxpayer had to assume the enormously larger fiscal burden consequent to actions of cowboy bankers.

Also many did recall that the industrial homes were providing a relatively inexpensive service wanted by the state and desired by a public anxious to clear from sight troublesome youngsters. Interestingly, the testimony of many receiving redress awards did appreciate the work of most of the religious caring for them. A major part of their complaint was about a small minority of the numerically inadequate and poorly trained religious staff, as well as bullying by older students.

The more recent McAleese report on the Magdalene Laundries, another type of institution run by nuns for troubled, orphaned, or unmarried pregnant girls, repeated the same mixed story of abuse and maltreatment, but also of appreciation.

The actions, admittedly belated, by the Irish hierarchy, such as their drafting a frameworks guideline for dealing with abusive clergy and engaging their own commission for investigating the various dioceses, suggests that the Church is taking the problem in hand. The international inspectorate that Pope Benedict XVI commissioned to examine the Irish Church in general, including the formation of priests, and his appointment of an energetic younger Papal Nuncio are further signs of the Church bringing the situation under control.

Of course the scandals in the Irish Church are not worse, and perhaps less outrageous, than what has occurred elsewhere, including the United States. What made it so distressing was the impression, which was not invalid, of an intensely devote Irish people being betrayed by so many clergy. But then, in absolute terms the numbers involved were a small percentage, especially if viewed in very broad historical terms.

The scandals of clerical sinfulness in medieval and early renaissance times, which usually were combined with having political power, could make those of the present appear relatively mild. After all, whether accurate or not, the Twelfth Century account of things in Ireland by Giraldus Cambrensis was an investigation into clerical failings.

Nonetheless, the abuse of children still deserves the scriptural admonishing about it being better to have a weight cast about one's neck and be thrown into the sea than corrupt the innocent!

It will take scholars decades to come to terms with the reasons for the outbreak of clerical sex abuse in the mid twentieth century. Was it unique? Was it a consequence of social sexual liberality? Were those vowed to celibacy inadequately prepared? Were there too many priests and religious and were many in orders for inadequate or the wrong reasons? Were the hierarchy unconscious of the abuses, or naively assumed they could be easily corrected with psychological remediation?

The late Archbishop Weakland of Milwaukee, whose diocese is now bankrupt because of lawsuits by victims of pederast priests, acknowledged that he had been governed by such assumptions in his transferring and covering up such clerics. Were some Irish bishops of the same mind-set? Was their thinking in conformity with the views of psychologists?

At any rate, the Church has seriously undertaken the necessary remedial steps. However, as is often the situation in history, severe hostile reaction, even revolution, often occurs after remedial actions are undertaken. The revolution in France occurred at the time when the French peasantry were probably better off and freer than most of the peasantry in the rest of Europe. The Bolshevik revolution occurred a decade after the beginning of constitutional reform in Tsarist Russia.

What that in mind one is apprehensive about the position of the Church in contemporary Ireland. There is a hostile, unfair, and often dishonest atmosphere in the media.

Things are different in America, where even media figures who themselves are not particularly religious generally give a forum to church figures and their allies. In addition, there are a greater variety of media outlets, especially radio stations and cable television, allowing the expression of opinions other than the political correct position of the establishment.

Even very liberal political figures go out of their way to show some deference to religious spokesmen. It says something about the remaining strength of religion in America that both political parties had Cardinal Dolan of New York deliver the invocation at their national conventions.

The intolerance and disregard for religious positions, especially Catholic positions, by many in the Irish media, forms the thinking of political speechwriters, particularly those of the Taoiseach. That was obvious in their penning of his speech for the closing session of the Dáil in 2011 that deplored the Vatican for having "contributed to the undermining of the child protection frameworks and guidelines of the Irish State and the Irish bishops"

In his speech the Taoiseach's noted "the dysfunction, disconnection, elitism – that dominate the culture of the Vatican to this day", where "the rape and torture of children were downplayed or 'managed' to uphold instead, the primacy of the institution, its power, standing, and 'reputation'."

He went on to quote the then Cardinal Ratzinger out of context from a 1990's document: "Standards of conduct appropriate to civil society or the workings of a democracy cannot be purely and simply applied to the church." In reality, Ratzinger was not insisting on church immunity from the state law, but simply asserting that the church's standards as to right and wrong are based on a criterion higher than the simple political process. Such would allow it to rebuff the claims made by totalitarian societies like Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, and even to challenge the claims of democratic societies to be morally infallible.

Continuing to ride the wave of anti-clericalism so prevalent in the Irish media, Enda Kenny insisted that the Irish Republic of 2011 was not Rome, and that he would refuse to be intimidated by "the swish of a soutane" and "the swing of a thurible".

The Taoiseach's rebuke of the Vatican was soon followed by the announcement by the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Eamon Gilmour, that Ireland will no longer maintain a resident ambassador to the Vatican. Ostensibly this was done for economic reasons, although the annual budgets of many consulates, never mind embassies, greatly exceed that to the Vatican.

Because the Vatican does not accept as ambassadors anyone who is simultaneously the ambassador to the Italian state (much as Ireland would not accept as ambassador anyone simultaneously serving as such to the Court of St. James), Irish dealings with the Vatican (with whom Ireland has had one of its oldest diplomatic relationships) henceforth will be conducted through the secretary of the Department for Foreign Affairs.

Given that officer's very full agenda dealings with the Vatican will necessarily be greatly minimized. Senior former Irish diplomats, including a former department secretary, have regretfully noted that this is a great loss for Irish diplomacy in terms of information gathering and international influence.

A year later the Taoiseach embarrassed himself and the nation by being televised using his cell phone while sitting in the front row among European People's Party leaders being addressed by Pope Benedict XVI.

But more disturbing than the hostility of political leaders and the media is their arrogance in suggesting how the Church should change to meet their agenda. When Church officials acknowledge problems, as did Archbishop Diarmuid Martin in December of 2011 in noting declining church attendance, religious vocations, and even financial contributions, the ***Irish Times*** insisted "if a road to regeneration is to be found" then consideration must be given to "an end to celibacy and acceptance of married priests; and, eventually, the ordination of women to the priesthood".(***Irish Times***, Dec 17, 2011)

In reaction, I wrote a letter to the editor of that paper suggesting the doctrinal inappropriateness of a female clergy, as well as the prudential grounds for maintaining clerical celibacy, but suggested a compromise solution of allowing the ordination of older married men. Predictable letters ensued. There were calls for a "Catholic Spring", ostensible inspired by the "Arab Spring". Naturally added were calls for the more popular selection of the Pope and of the bishops, a reversal of the creeping "infallibilism" started by St. Pius IX, and augmented by Blessed John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, a revision of canon law, and a more inclusive church that would modify some of its teachings on sexual mores. (***Irish Times***, Jan. 2, 3, 4, 5, and 9, 2012)

Unfortunately many in the Church are moved by a spirit of accommodation. For example, Father Donal Dorr, at a meeting of the Association of Catholic Priests held in Cork in October, 2012 was critical of those Church figures who insisted on such things as "the importance of clerical dress", training of priests "separately from non-clerical students", taking "a strong line … against the use of contraceptives", viewing homosexuality as 'a disordered state ", regarding a male clergy as "an infallible truth of our faith", and excluding from episcopal appointment supporters of the ordination of women or anyone " 'soft' on issues of sexual morality".

To him the Vatican Council was "the beginning of a new openness in the Church", whereby "we are called by the Holy Spirit to move on beyond the necessary compromises in the Council documents". A fresh look at "the burning issues and new situations of today", he said, would suggest "that much of the theology of sexuality preached in the Church in the past was simply wrong". (Donal Dorr, ***Talk before Association of Catholic Priests***, Cork, October 13, 2012.)

It was against the background of such in-house criticism, never mind political and media hostility, that the Eucharistic Congress was held in Dublin in June last year. What a striking contrast with the Congress held eighty years before.

G. K. Chesterton appropriately titled his book length account of that Congress as *Christendom in Dublin*. Then military contingents met and escorted ecclesiastical dignitaries

arriving at Dun Laoghaire, the streets and residences of the city were decked with national and Papal colors, and thousands attended Benediction Service at O'Connell Bridge, never mind the more than a million at the closing Mass at Phoenix Park.

In 2012 a visitor to the city would hardly be aware the Congress was taking place. Very possibly American visitors attending a football match in Dublin between the teams of University of Notre Dame and the United States Naval Academy a few months later had a greater impact on the city (at least its social life).

While the regular meetings of the Congress at the RDS were very well run and well attended, they obviously paled in comparison to the 1932 Congress, even if one takes into account the packed final Mass at Croke Park, attended by the President, the Taoiseach, and the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. However, while not having the numerical strength of the earlier Congress the 2012 gathering displayed an intensity and commitment that leaves one hopeful for the Church in Ireland. It was not only the quality of the liturgies, the homilies, the speakers and workshops, but the devotion, especially of so many young people.

This was demonstrated particularly by the Eucharistic Procession on Wednesday night, June 13, in which the Blessed Sacrament was carried out of the RDS and around its perimeter for 2.5km followed by 11,000 of the faithful. Another striking event was the attendance of hundreds of young people at a Reconciliation or Penance service at about the same time that many more of their Irish contemporaries were taken up with watching the Irish soccer team being humiliated by Spain in the Euro Cup competition in Poland.

Furthermore important gestures of repentance for the abuse of children by clergy and religious, as well as the tardy if not indifferent response by some of the hierarchy, were made, including a visit to the pilgrimage site in Lough Derg, County Donegal by Marc Cardinal Ouellet, the Papal Legate to the Congress, and Archbishop Charles Brown, the Papal Nuncio to Ireland.

While penance and sorrow for the failures of churchmen are appropriate, such failures would be compounded were the Church to be inhibited in proclaiming its message from fear

of being regarded as out of touch with the modern world. A very clear example of a readiness to do so was the address given by Barry Hickey, Emeritus Archbishop of Perth, Australia, to thousands in the Main Arena of the RDS on Tuesday, June 12, in which he insisted that the Church had to be unhesitant in proclaiming its teaching on marriage and family.

Inevitably cynics would claim, as did one letter writer to the *Irish Times*, that, "in time, the 2012 Eucharistic Congress will be seen as the swan-song of the Catholic Church" and "Ireland would be a better place" without it. More accurate would be to see the congress less the swan song of the Church than an expression of its vitality, the same vitality possessed by the early Christians of the first, second, and third centuries, who were regarded as so out of touch with the prevailing ethos of the Roman Empire.

One has to acknowledge that the Church has a diminished position in Irish life, culturally, socially, and politically. Ireland is not the fabled land of saints and scholars. That image no doubt was overdrawn, but was not without having been of some validity, especially if measured by the impact of the Irish immigrants, clerical and lay, on the development of the Church in the United States, as well as by the disproportionate Irish presence in missionary fields throughout the world.

Just like the Church in the United States, the Irish Church is enduring hard times. However, what makes it so upsetting in Ireland, both to the faithful in Ireland, as well as to those who look from abroad, is the disappearance of what had been a Catholic society. Now days the voice of the Church is one of many competing voices for public attention and that voice is often barely audible.

In America such a situation was something the Catholic Church was well used to and accordingly developed agencies of promoting its teachings. Even today, when many of what had been Catholic institutions in America have diluted their character, there remain strong and articulate individuals, clerical and lay, as well as organizations, schools, and publications, effectively carrying on the mission.

Only of late has the Church in Ireland been confronted with the need for an vigorous defensive position. Perhaps softened by a possibly insincere deference, Church leaders were

not readied for what has happened. But it is always in such times that the true heroes, and if need be, martyrs, emerge.

Consider certain specific issues.

The Orwellian-titled Defence of Life in Pregnancy Act has been enacted and some of its defenders have tried to argue that it will work to limit abortions. From the perspective of an American, I would have to acknowledge that it is scarcely as bad as what exists in many parts of America, nor what the "Catholic" Governor of New York State, Andrew Cuomo, sought, so far unsuccessfully, to promote in that state, all in the name of women's "reproductive rights". But it is the very wide, and unnecessary, opening of the door.

In America the struggle against the scourge of abortion is being conducted on a variety of local fronts rather than attempts at a federal constitutional amendment or an effort at a judicial reversal of the notorious Roe v. Wade decision that declared abortion a right. Perhaps the Right to Life cause in Ireland, and the Catholic Church will also have to struggle at various lower and more local levels, even at times waging campaigns of civil disobedience, beginning with challenges to attempts to compel personnel and institutions to disregard their personal and organizational ethos.

On the issue of religious education, besides insisting on more appropriate religious instruction in existing denominational schools, perhaps the time has come to create a distinct parochial school system that could charge tuition, but also demand tuition vouchers where the state could compensate those families not utilizing the state or national school system.

Another concept bearing some consideration would be the development, but only if done on a very high quality basis, of Catholic colleges. Its students could then pursue their post graduate studies at the various other universities in Ireland and elsewhere. A certain number will invariably also enter seminaries and novitiates. A classic example is Thomas Aquinas College in California, whose alumni have proceeded to some of the finest universities in America and a significant portion of them have opted for the priesthood and religious life.

There is potential for all of these things in Ireland, but central is the Faith itself, on which all else depends.

Naturally adherence to the Faith implies acceptance of those words of Cardinal Ratzinger to which the Taoiseach took such exception: “Standards of conduct appropriate to civil society or the workings of a democracy cannot be purely and simply applied to the church.”

By not accepting the changing values of the democratic process the faithful may well become a remnant in what had been a Catholic society. That burden will be all the more daunting given the increasing intrusion of state authority in individual, familial, and communal matters.

Fortunately, the existence of groups like the Iona Institute makes one confident that the challenge to Faith can be met.