
The Pontiff Pontificates

POPE BENEDICT XVI has, after much prevarication, decided to comment on the sexual abuse of children by priests. In an extraordinary eight-page pastoral letter addressed to Roman Catholics in Ireland Benedict noted that the country has “in recent decades” confronted “rapid transformation and secularization” which has “often adversely” affected “people’s traditional adherence to Catholic teaching and values.”

In this way, the old boy insinuates that the problem of child abuse is in some way associated with the Godless pressures of the modern world. If only Catholic belief and commitment were stronger, all would be well. This will come as a surprise to thousands of Irishmen now in their sixties and seventies who remember being fondled and bugged by priests and Christian Brothers long before Ireland was subject to the pressures of “rapid transformation and secularization”. Indeed, in my certain knowledge, all this carry-on was widely known throughout Irish society during the 1950s, and probably for many years before, as the bastard offspring of ‘wayward’ girls, the hapless sons and daughters of landless labourers, the spawn of dysfunctional families – the inconvenient trash of Irish society – were surrendered to the tender mercies of Catholic institutions.

The truth is, of course, the only modern thing about Catholicism and child abuse in Ireland is that the victims are speaking out, and the laity are at long last up in arms at the hypocrisy of the hierarchy. This is the real effect of secularisation. As life in the Irish Republic has become more modern and more self-confident the Catholic Church has increasingly come face to face with a highly articulate population who, despite having been well educated in Catholic institutions, are

no longer prepared to put up with the dark doings of the clergy.

The crisis of the Catholic Church resides in this paradox. It is an institution that has done much to promote education, and to provide people with the intellectual tools and capacity for independent thinking; yet, these are precisely the qualities, which have led the faithful to reject the absolutism of the Pontifical monarchy in Rome. The Pope, the cardinals, the bishops and the priests, are no longer regarded as being above suspicion or criticism.

The contradictions that generations of devout Roman Catholics have lived with are beginning to become untenable in the face of the ultramontane years of John Paul II's reign and those of the opening years of Benedict XVI's pontificate; there is now a widening rebellion among ordinary Catholics against the intransigence of the hierarchy.

This rebellion has been growing for some decades throughout Europe and the Americas. However, it was slowed for some time by apparent relaxations and modernizations. After the death of Pius XII in 1958, the grim endorsements of paternal authority insisted upon by Leo XIII and Pius XI were gone, gone too was the rigorous social conservatism of Pius XII. In the place of the wives "who must be subject" and "obedient" to their husbands, we got a version of marriage which was not merely "the foundation of the state" but was also said to be a "community" in which personal friendship between man and wife was canvassed as an expression of the Divine Will. Henceforward a man was urged to become "involved as a husband and father in the motherhood of his wife".

All this was covered under the rubric of Paul VI's phrase concerning what he called "the civilization of love": the family, which is "the fundamental cell of society", and which is "endangered by a kind of cultural uprooting" is indeed placed at the centre and the heart of the civilization of love. These linguistic shifts of emphasis, together with striking changes to the liturgy and manners of the Church, permitted

many Catholics to remain faithful to Rome as the real contradictions between their own beliefs and social practice, on the one side, and the injunctions of the hierarchy on the other, began to mount.

This truce between the lives and beliefs of ordinary Catholics and the dictates of Church doctrine has now begun to collapse, as Benedict XVI feels compelled to insist that nothing at all has changed. And, it is indeed true that nothing at all has changed since the time of Pius XII or even that of Leo XIII. Marriage is still a covenant “which Christ raised to a Sacrament”. Women are still barred from the priesthood and the episcopate. Priests must still ensure that they are not defiled by intercourse with women. Eighty-nine years after Dr Marie Stopes opened her first clinic, contraception remains banned by the celibate priesthood. Homosexuals, despite being respected by the Church in their “human person”, remain vile sinners if they actually engage in gay relationships. Nothing has fundamentally changed. To be sure the Roman Curia and the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (formally known as the Inquisition), has accommodated the light of reason in its thinking, together with the discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and Charles Lyell, but women’s equality, divorce, gay emancipation, and contraception, are steps too far; it cannot contemplate accepting these things without unravelling the institution.

Fundamentally, it cannot submit to secular realities or to secular authority, it can only subordinate itself to Divine authority. It can see scientific reason as divinely inspired, the relations between men and women are divinely inspired, marriage is divinely inspired, the incidence of infertility, of birth defects and those born with disabilities are, like the male leadership of the Church, divinely inspired. Alternatively, it cannot accept things, which it does not conceive as coming directly from God, like contraception, divorce, abortion, homosexuality, or women priests.

The importance of all this in relation to the sexual abuse of children is underlined in the Pope’s pastoral

letter by the absence of any discussion or reference to the civil law. Child abuse is acknowledged to be in conflict with canon law and the letter refers to “existing canonical penalties”. The Pope even writes of “egregious crimes”, but nowhere does he talk of the Church’s responsibilities with regard to upholding the civil law, nowhere does the Pope talk of the need for the laity or the priests, nuns, and Bishops, to report sexual crimes and their perpetrators to the police.

This ‘sin of omission’ reveals why the Roman Church is in such a pickle. Whenever priests in the past were known to be interfering sexually with children they were simply moved by the bishop from one diocese to another, or from one job to another. No reports were passed to the police and no prosecutions resulted. Indeed, it was common practice for the Church in a number of countries to require the victims of sexual abuse by priests to swear vows of silence. The Roman Pontiff and the Catholic clergy throughout the world have always done everything they could to keep the matter ‘in-house’; they continue to evade the authority, which the civil law has with regard to sexual crimes whether or not the perpetrators are priests.

This is why the Pope’s solution to the problem of child abuse by his priests is praying “for an outpouring of God’s mercy”, or for the organization of “periods of Eucharistic adoration”, or for “Apostolic Visitation” and nationwide missions. The Pope will advocate doing everything, but simply calling the cops. Priests have been consecrated by God and His Church, and are empowered by the hierarchy to put the Body and Blood of Christ into the mouths of their parishioners at Holy Communion. They are magic people, capable of performing the miracle of the Mass on a daily basis in the “real presence of Christ”. This is the reason why the Church finds it so difficult to demand that priests submit to the law of the land; this is the reason why it has traditionally refused to report its paedophile priests to the police. The problem for the hierarchy is that modern Roman Catholic men, women, and children, expect nothing less.