

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 18, 2009 at 9:16am

Thoughts on the resignation of an Irish bishop

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NCR Today

This from the Irish Times.

THE FALL from grace of the Bishop of Limerick, Donal Murray, is a necessary and inevitable consequence of the Murphy report into the cover-up of child sexual abuse in the Dublin diocese.

But it is by no means a sufficient response to the amorality and recklessness detailed in that grim document. Indeed, it would be grossly unfair to Dr Murray were he to be the sacrificial lamb who must atone for the collective sins of the Roman Catholic Church. If his departure were to be seen as the end, rather than the beginning, of a radical process of accountability, the implication would be that his behaviour was the exception rather than the rule. The truth is he operated a system that seems to have been universally applied throughout the church.

It would almost be comforting if Donal Murray's tragedy were that of an evil man. It is actually much more profound than that. It is the tragedy of a decent man who was drawn into collusion with evil and who, even in his resignation statement showed no sign of understanding or accepting the consequences of his failures. Although he continued yesterday to try to excuse the inexcusable, there is no evidence that he set out to be cynical or cruel or that he was, in the ordinary course of events, indifferent to the sufferings of vulnerable children. Were he any of those things, the church could regard him as an aberrant and anomalous figure, a malignity in an otherwise healthy body. To realise that, on the contrary, he most probably believed himself to be acting properly and morally is to confront the unavoidable reality of a power structure that distorts the most basic impulses of human decency.

It is that larger system that has to make itself accountable. The Catholic Church is still far too deeply embedded within Irish society and retains far too much temporal power for this to be a matter of concern to the faithful alone. Undemocratic institutions who see themselves as answerable only to a God to whose will they believe they have privileged access, are a danger to society as a whole. Conversely, a complete change in the institutional church's culture, away from the arrogance of power and towards the humility and openness of service, is the only way to make restitution for the terrible damage it has done.

That change has to start with something that the church itself demands of its flock ? an honest confession. If the Pope and the Roman curia are as outraged as they have claimed to be, they should give us a detailed and complete account of their own dealings with child abuse cases in Ireland. They should start by handing over all relevant archives to the Murphy commission and every serving and retired Catholic bishop should open his own record to scrutiny.

More broadly, the Vatican and the Irish hierarchy must finally deal with an obvious truth. They must recognise that the accumulation of temporal and political power has ultimately not served the faith in which they purport to believe. It has corrupted and corroded it. If they are ever to renew that faith, they must learn how to be, not the shepherds of flocks of sheep, but the servants of citizens.

While the above was written in Ireland it could also have been written in the United States where U.S. Catholics hold out, hope against hope, that their own bishops would act to accept responsibility for decades of scandalous sex abuse cover-up. Meanwhile, lack of accountability continues to erode the very foundations of the church.

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