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A divide that may not be bridged

Joan Chittister | Feb. 19, 2010 From Where I Stand

Being in Ireland as the country and the church continue the torturous process of resolving -- if that's possible -- the standoff between victims of sexual abuse and the local episcopacy, I find myself returning again and again to a strange but impelling image from a filmic past.

It is the closing scene of Frederico Fellini's 1960 Italian film masterpiece, "La Dolce Vita," the scene on the beach in which you expect to see the man's search for love finally resolved. He is a professional figure, a sophisticated man who specializes in beguiling women and then abandoning them. This last encounter with a simple young woman on the beach seems idyllic. Now, you're certain, love will soften the differences fate has created between them. But the movement of each character toward the other stops. Between them on the shore is an inlet too wide to negotiate in suit and shoes. As the tide comes in and the inlet widens they attempt a conversation, calling to one another across the gulf, but, you come to realize, they are not capable of either hearing or understanding what the other one is saying. And therein lies the tale. There are encounters in which, without great effort on both sides, communication, however desirable, is not possible.

I've been watching the Irish sex abuse situation here for years. And learning about communication from every minute of it. This is not the United States of America. This is Catholic Ireland. Nothing could be more different than these two cultures in their approach to a church problem. In the United States when the sexual abuse crisis erupted and the church retreated behind a plexiglass of legal responses, people picketed churches, signed petitions, demonstrated outside chanceries, and formed protest groups.

In Ireland, the response had another kind of chill about it, however. In Ireland the gulf got wider and deeper by the day. It felt like the massive turning of a silent back against the bell towers and statues and holy water fonts behind it. No major public protests occurred. "Not at all," as they are fond of saying. But the situation moved at the upper echelon of the country relatively quietly but like a glacier. Slowly but inexorably.

A country which, until recently, checked its constitution against "the teachings of the church" and had, therefore, allowed no contraceptives to be sold within its boundaries, unleashed its entire legal and political system against the storm.

They broke a hundred years of silence about the abuse of unwed mothers in the so-called "Magdalene Launderies." They investigated the treatment of orphaned or homeless children in the "industrial schools" of the country where physical abuse had long been common. The government itself took public responsibility for having failed to monitor these state-owned but church-run programs. And they assessed compensatory damages, the results of which are still under review in the national parliament.

Meanwhile, the average Irish person in the pews digested the information and, at the same time, calmly but clearly to declare a separation between "the faith and the church," between the sacramental system and the individual conscience. The sacraments they continued to respect, but church attendance has tumbled in the cities. Their individual consciences, on the other hand, they reclaimed. "They won't be telling us what to do anymore," an old man on the street said in one of the earliest public interviews on the problem. "We'll be

deciding that for ourselves." And, to judge by local conversations and polling data years later, nothing much has changed in that regard.

The fact is that there is still an undigested part of the problem that may well determine the responses of the next generation toward both faith and church more than it affects this one. For them, the issue is not the nature of fallen humanity. Mortal frailty the Irish have learned well over the centuries. The issue is responsibility. On two levels.

The survivor's response to the meeting of Pope Benedict XVI with the Irish Episcopacy had the ring of repugnance about it. "Pope Benedict," Andrew Madden, a spokesperson for the survivors said, "has not articulated full acceptance of the findings of the Murphy Report, as we asked him to do," (RTE1 News, February 16.) That is needed, he went on, "to quell the rise in revisionism and the surge in denial from some quarters within the Catholic church in relation to its findings."

The message is clear:

First, until the church, in an official way, admits that the findings of the Murphy Report on the overwhelming amount of child abuse that went on in Dublin are true and accepts responsibility for the climate that made cover up an episcopal practice, the case, at least in the victims' minds, is not closed. Archbishop Dermot Clifford of Cashel lamented that the Murphy investigation might well be extended to all the dioceses in Ireland. If that happens, he said, "the past won't be past for a long time."

Second, until the bishops who were part of the cover up all resign, the victims argue, the church will not have proven either their rejection of the practice, their determination to change or their ownership of the problem.

Point: Four bishops criticized in the report have offered their resignations, but so far the pope has officially accepted only one of them. All were auxiliary bishops at the time of the first reports of abuse. They did nothing to bring the situation to light. But none of them, no one in the Irish episcopacy, has yet to admit to their own role in a cover-up. No bishop, in a land where the burden of guilt fell heavily on the backs of Irish people, has admitted his own guilt, his own defense of the institution rather than the care of the children. No one has said, "The church -- I -- was wrong in the handling of this scandal. Therefore, I, too, am responsible for this abuse."

So how are the Irish people reacting to the impasse? Well, as they opened Catholic Schools Week in Ireland this month, the Market Research Bureau of Ireland was reporting that 74 percent of the population think that "the church did not react properly to the Murphy Report" and that 61 percent of the population "want no Catholic control of elementary schools." Little more than half of the respondents think the church will really change to prevent abuse in the future, and 47 percent feel more negative than before toward the church.

Most telling of all, perhaps, is the fact that the support of the older generation which, at its best, was once only marginally higher than the support of 18-24 year olds, may be shifting even lower. "The fallout from the Murphy report was a shock to the bishops," Archbishop Clifford said, and "had a far greater negative effect on older people than the previous two investigations had been."

"While they were preaching at us they were damaging our children," an old woman said. "What more can you say?"

From where I stand, it seems that the long-awaited meeting between the pope and the bishops of Ireland is over now, more with a yawn than a standing ovation. In true Irish fashion, everybody's talking about it, but if the data is saying anything, it may be that the love affair between the people and the church is on very rocky ground; one side is not hearing the other and the gulf is growing wider every day.

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