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Irish bishops reject 'bonus culture' of capitalism run amok

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 21, 2011 NCR Today

Facing an economic crisis that has produced record unemployment, staggering levels of household debt, and deep political unrest, the Catholic bishops of Ireland have issued a stinging critique of ?the excesses of advanced capitalism? and its ?bonus culture,? calling for an economy rooted in social solidarity as opposed to ?radical individualism.?

Pressing beyond abstractions, the bishops pointedly call upon the Irish public to support higher tax rates in order to fund social services, especially for low-income workers and migrants.

The bishops warn that if the ?justifiable anger? over the economic collapse is not addressed, ?the specter of social fragmentation and violence cannot be ruled out.?

The Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish bishops? conference issued its statement, ?From Crisis to Hope [1] ,? this morning in Dublin, just five days ahead of national elections in Ireland on Friday.

With the collapse of socialism as political force, the Irish bishops write, ?we are witnessing for the first time the emergence of a more radical individualism which has little sensitivity to the nature and significance of belonging to a society.?

As part of the broader picture, the bishops also warn of ?a breakdown in trust in core institutions? in Ireland, ?including the Catholic Church? ? a reference to the sexual abuse crisis which has devastated the Irish church.

The bishops acknowledged ?the need for the church to take account of its own failings,? pledging themselves to ?addressing the wrongs of the past and ensuring they will not be repeated.?

Yesterday, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin and Cardinal Sean O?Malley of Boston, currently leading a Vatican-sponsored visitation of the church in Ireland, held a ?Liturgy of Lament and Repentance for the sexual abuse of children by priests and religious? in Dublin, with both men washing the feet of a group of victims in a symbolic expression of contrition.

Sources in the Irish church say that today's statement is a sign that the bishops want to remain engaged in wider social debates, despite the damage to their credibility caused by the revelations of abuse and cover-up.

The bulk of the statement from the Justice and Peace council is directed at a critique of what the Irish bishops describe as the ?dominant individualist/consumerist societal ethos" that took root in Irish society during two decades of record growth.

In its place, the bishops call for greater emphasis on social solidarity, protection of the vulnerable, and attention to the ?gift economy? ? a reference to Pope Benedict XVI?s recent social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, and its argument that self-interest alone is an inadequate basis for social life.

After earning a reputation as the ?Celtic Tiger" during the 1990s, Ireland was the first state in the Euro-zone to enter a recession following the global economic crisis in 2008. Ireland now has the highest level of household debt relative to disposable income anywhere in the developed world. In 2009, Ireland also recorded its highest levels of unemployment since the government began collecting statistics in the late 1960s. Though Ireland?s robust economy attracted several waves of immigration in recent decades, an estimated 1,000 people a week are now leaving the country.

In November, the government agreed on a $116 billion bailout package from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, a key condition for which was an ?austerity budget? in Ireland which features deep cuts in social spending.

The bishops? language about a ?bonus culture? is a reference to revelations that at the peak of the meltdown, Irish bankers, developers, and government officials ? widely held to be the primary architects of the disaster ? were still collecting substantial bonuses, while ordinary people suffered.

Those bonuses are widely perceived in Ireland as symbols not only of corruption, but a ?me-first? economic philosophy run amok. One recent poll found that only Greeks, Israelis, Nigerians and Romanians rate their political parties as more corrupt, and another concluded that satisfaction with the government in Ireland stands at just four percent.

The Irish bishops assert that the bonus culture is ?destructive of civic virtue.?

Though styled as a reflection on the common good rather than a ?political manifesto,? the bishops? statement nevertheless offers some clear policy prescriptions, including:

- Rejecting an income policy where ?large six-figure salaries continue to be awarded to senior executives of semi-state companies? at the same time that the minimum wage, state pensions and disability protections are all being cut.
- Revisions to Ireland?s comparatively low tax rates, in order to pay for ?European standards of public services.?
- Protecting the rights of migrant workers and their families.
- Responsible use of natural resources.
- Maintaining development aid for impoverished nations abroad.
- Defending the right to life and the traditional family.
- Greater balance between ?equality of opportunity? and ?equality of outcomes.?

The statement was presented this morning at the Capuchin Day Centre for Homeless People in Dublin, founded in the late 1960s. It?s regarded as the largest food center in the Irish capital, providing 400 meals a day for homeless and low-income persons.

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[1] http://www.catholicbishops.ie/images/stories/what_we_do/ICJSA/From_Crisis_to_Hope_-_Working_to_Achieve_the_Common_Good.pdf