

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

March 2, 2011 at 1:11pm

In Ireland, economic prosperity destroyed the church

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

Ireland, still the land of a thousand welcomes, is now also the land of a thousand heartbreaks. Church scandals gathered steam for 25 years and the financial Celtic Tiger roared from 1995 to 2007. Now both Church and Tiger are moribund, or dead, depending on how maudlin you want to be or to become as St. Patrick's Day approaches.

It's not too much to say the Celtic Tiger ate the Church.

The Irish Catholic situation is what you'd expect. Vocations have evaporated. Mass attendance is dwindling. An air of secularism has replaced the Christianity St. Patrick planted and St. Brigid nurtured centuries ago.

While the Irish economy took off, the scandals grew wildly. In case you missed it, it was awful. Stories of randy priests and investigations of disgusting situations at orphanages and boarding schools run by men and women religious generated pounds of government reports. Denials from bishops and chancery staffers were the order of the day.

Coincidentally, the Celtic Tiger transformed Ireland from one of the poorest to one of the richest nations in Western Europe. Offering both tax incentives and an educated population to corporate investors, Ireland saw its standard of living soar.

The country suddenly had a 10 percent immigrant population, mostly from Poland and the Baltics, as it welcomed any European Union citizen to its shores. There was plenty of work to go around, as Dell and Amazon set up shop in new airport industrial sites and Pfizer started cooking up Viagra down in Cork.

No longer did Ireland send its sons and daughters to the Continent or the Americas to look for work.

No longer did it send its sons and daughters to the priesthood and religious life.

So why did the Vatican need to send a team of apostolic visitors to investigate the Irish church? The situation is not that hard to figure out.

A mixture of prosperity and scandal was the deadly brew poured into the minds and hearts of young people already saturated with the output of new media, as televisions, radios and computers purveyed a radically different culture from the one the church controlled for ages. The concurrent overwhelming lack of silence left little space to contemplate a life with God in service to God's people.

Nevertheless, Benedict XVI went through his Rolodex and came up with a team of Irish surnamed visitors for four major dioceses (Armagh, Dublin, Cashel, and Tuam): retired British Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley, Toronto Archbishop Thomas Collins, and Ottawa Archbishop Terrence Prendergast.

The pope also found four visitors for men's and women's religious houses: British Jesuit Fr. Gero McLoughlin; Irish Religious of Jesus and Mary Sr. Mairin McDonagh; American Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sharon Holland; and Redemptorist Joseph W. Tobin, now an archbishop and Secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

Benedict wrote that the visits were "intended to assist the local Church on her path of renewal," and that included seminaries. So just a few weeks ago New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan and Baltimore Archbishop Edwin O'Brien took a look at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth; St. Malachy's College, Belfast; and All Hallows College and Milltown Institute, both in Dublin.

What could they all have found?

There are over three and a half million Catholics in Ireland -- about 86 percent of the population. According to an Irish television survey, fewer than half attend Sunday Mass.

There are 73 seminarians at Ireland's national seminary, Maynooth, preparing for its 26 dioceses and a few religious orders. There are 9,000 men and women religious, 80 percent of whom are over 75.

What can the visitors report? There is a desperate need for ministry, but little taste for church. Government cutbacks threaten social services and education, yet there seems no well-functioning vehicle to bring young Irish men and women to Christianity, let alone to service of the church.

We don't need Chicken Little to warn that the stained glass ceiling is falling. It's already in pieces on the ground.

I daresay few Irish men and women under forty have much respect for Catholicism, in Ireland or anywhere else. Of course there are pockets of belief, in villages and towns where things have not yet changed that much. But they will.

So, while Dublin's Archbishop Diarmud Martin and Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley dramatically prostrated themselves in repentance at Dublin's St. Mary's Pro-Cathedral a short while back, I'm not so sure their gesture will make much difference.

There needs to be a radical departure from the church's old ways of doing business -- and that includes a long list of real reforms.

We're all Irish on St. Patrick's Day, but as Chicago plans to tint its river emerald, and New York lines up the paint cans for Firth Avenue's green line, and as towns and villages plan to recall their real or adopted Irish heritage, there is a sadness in the air.

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