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'Irish Spring' reflects attitudes toward Vatican

Richard McBrien | Oct. 10, 2011 Essays in Theology

The newspapers and television reports have been filled these past few months with references to the so-called Arab Spring, focusing on dramatic developments in Egypt, Libya, Syria and so many other countries in the Arab world.

There has been a comparable development in the Catholic world as well. One could refer to it as the Irish Spring, even though it didn't go into high gear until the summer and early fall.

The Sunday *New York Times* on Sept. 18 wrote a two-page story on developments in Ireland titled, "A Rupture of Reverence for the Vatican Sets Off a Transformation in Ireland."

The opening salvo was fired by Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny, a practicing Catholic, who unexpectedly took the floor of the Irish Parliament this summer to openly criticize the Church, and specifically the Vatican, for its presumption to place canon law above civil law in matters affecting sexual abuse by priests and religious.

A country where 87 percent of the population identifies itself as Catholic and where the Church runs more than 90 percent of the nation's primary schools is in the throes of a major transformation ? from one of "awe, respect and fear" of the Vatican to something approaching "rage, disgust and defiance."

This transformation is the result of "a long series of horrific revelations about decades of abuse of children entrusted to the church's care by a reverential populace."

While Ireland isn't the only Catholic country where the Vatican's image has been tarnished, nowhere have developments "shaken a whole society so thoroughly or so intensively as in Ireland."

"For the first time in Ireland," the prime minister said, "a report into child sexual abuse exposed an attempt by the Holy See to frustrate an inquiry into a sovereign, democratic republic as little as three years ago, not three decades ago."

Kenny was referring to the so-called Cloyne report, named after the diocese in question, which detailed abuse and cover-ups by church officials in southern Ireland through 2009. The bishop of Cloyne, a former secretary to popes, has since resigned.

Charging that the Vatican had encouraged bishops to ignore child-protection guidelines that the Irish bishops themselves had adopted, the prime minister attacked "the dysfunction, the disconnection, the elitism that dominate the culture of the Vatican."

"The rape and torture of children were downplayed, or 'managed,' to uphold instead the primacy of the institution ? its power, its standing and its reputation (an all-too-familiar charge)." Instead of listening with humility to the heartbreaking evidence of "humiliation and betrayal," the prime minister continued, "the Vatican's response was to parse and analyze it with the gimlet eye of a canon lawyer."

"It was a seminal moment," wrote a correspondent for *The Irish Times*. "No Irish prime minister has ever talked to the Catholic Church before in this fashion. The obsequiousness of the Irish state toward the Vatican is gone. The deference is gone."

According to *The New York Times*, the prime minister's declaration "deeply angered" the Vatican. It immediately withdrew its ambassador from Dublin, who was reassigned to the Czech Republic. The position remains vacant to this day, and there has even been talk of merging the ambassadorship to Ireland with that of Italy.

However, the prime minister enjoys widespread support within Ireland itself. Again, according to *The New York Times*, the Irish people feel "doubly betrayed: first by the abuse itself, and second by what many see as a cover-up by the church, compounded by the often opaque, legalistic language with which it defends itself."

As noted above, this is an all-too-familiar feeling in the United States. And so, too, is the sharp decrease in church attendance. The archbishop of Dublin estimates that only 18 percent of Catholics in his archdiocese attended Mass every week.

Eamon Gilmore, Ireland's deputy prime minister, said the Church would no longer enjoy its previous privileges and powers as in times past, when the Church, with the government's collusion, "effectively dictated the social policy of the state."

When it comes to protecting children, Mr. Gilmore said, "Everybody in the state ? irrespective of whether they're ordinary citizens doing everyday work, or a priest or a bishop ? has to comply with the law."

A "transformation," indeed.

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