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Irish priests struggle with sins of the minority

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High Court Justice Sean Ryan is photographed as he releases the findings of the Irish government's Commission to Inquire Into Child Abuse in the Conrad Hotel in Dublin in 2009. The commission's nine-year investigation found physical and sexual abuse was endemic in Irish institutions for boys run by religious between 1940 and the late 1970s. (CNS photo/Cathal McNaughton, Reuters)

DUBLIN -- Father Damien McGroarty, 29, is one of the youngest diocesan priests in Ireland. Ordained just over a year ago, he should still be at the honeymoon stage of his vocation.

Instead, an independent audit of clerical sexual abuse in his Raphoe Diocese left him soul-searching about the public's perception of priesthood.

In a homily Dec. 4, he acknowledged to Massgoers at St. Eunan's Cathedral in Letterkenny, County Donegal that the ongoing abuse crisis made him question whether people ridicule him for being a priest.

"Will I be branded a pedophile priest?" he asked.

Raphoe, in northwestern Ireland, is still gripped by revelations concerning its abusive priests, including the notorious Father Eugene Greene, who was jailed for 12 years in 2000 for his crimes against 26 victims between 1962 and 1985.

Ireland's Catholic Church has been rocked by several judicial reports that found that bishops and religious superiors put the avoidance of scandal ahead of the welfare of children. The Irish prime minister criticized the Vatican in a speech to Parliament, and the Vatican reassigned its Irish ambassador.

Most Irish priests feel tarred by the sins of a minority, and they realize that the Irish public's perception of them is at an all-time low. A recent poll showed that the public vastly overestimates the numbers of priests guilty of abuse.

Inaccurate information is contributing to an anti-clerical climate, according to the Association of Catholic Priests. The group, which represents more than 600 priests, blames the pervasive negativity surrounding the priesthood for the defamation of Mill Hill Father Kevin Reynolds by RTE Television last May.

In late November, as the Irish courts made a massive award to Father Reynolds over the RTE libel, the Public Prosecution Service of Northern Ireland cleared Father Oliver Brennan of the Armagh Archdiocese of a false allegation against him, and a priest from the Diocese of Cloyne was also cleared by the courts. These cases have thrown the spotlight on a plethora of issues, not least the church's protocols on naming and removing priests from ministry when an abuse accusation is made. For priests who are falsely accused, the current procedures leave them under a cloud while an investigation is ongoing and, even after they are cleared, many feel their

name always remains tarnished.

Catholic News Service approached several priests who had been falsely accused, but they were unwilling to discuss the issue. They remain "traumatized," said Father Tony Flannery, spokesman for the Association of Catholic Priests.

One priest from the West of Ireland, who was the subject of a false allegation and was cleared after an investigation, spoke to CNS on the condition that his real name was not used. The priest said he thought falsely accused priests are being "disenfranchised by the church authorities in the methodology used to respond to accusations."

The priest, identified for this story as Father Aodh, said he believed this is part of a "swinging of the pendulum" and "overzealousness to make up ground" in response to past mistakes. But it is doing great injury to priests who are unjustly accused and to the relationship of bishop and priest, he said.

"Priests generally are a very vulnerable sector of society now," he said.

His view is confirmed by another priests association spokesman, Father Brendan Hoban, who told CNS that the association was aware through feedback from its members and nonmembers that there are Irish bishops who, "by their attitude, are compounding the demonization of their own priests."

"We see this in the manner in which priests are sometimes asked to step aside; in the neglect of their basic rights to accommodation, an income and legal advice; in the avoidance of a responsibility of care, not least of the priest's family -- all of which leads to an acceptance of the societal prejudice that a priest is guilty until he can prove his innocence," he said.

Sen. Ronan Mullen is a parishioner at Father Reynolds' St. Cuan's Church in Ahascragh, County Galway. He is highly critical of the church authorities' lack of communication in the early stages of the priest's case. No statement was forthcoming for almost 10 days, by which time the media had been saturated with coverage of the false allegation against Father Reynolds.

"The way that the stepping aside is being managed is the real problem. There isn't even a basic communication from the accused priest, and he is spirited away. People are left to draw the worst of conclusions," Mullen said.

He said he feels there is a certain timidity in the church's response. Church officials must allow "the basic standard of the presumption of innocence until proven guilty," Mullen said.

He also said he believes it should be possible to allow the priest to put out a statement in his own name rebutting the allegation.

"Even if he turns out to be guilty, I don't think that that can hurt the church," Mullen said.

Father Aodh said false accusations are doing "a tremendous disservice" to the real victims of abuse while also creating a "rupture" between priests and their bishops, which he describes as "tragic." He also said accused priests are treated differently than other accused professionals, who "are not publicly vilified."

Marie Collins, who was abused as a child by a Dublin priest, told CNS that anyone -- priest or layperson -- is entitled to be considered innocent until there is some proof. She said false accusations do "enormous harm to genuine victims. We (victims) have spent many years gaining credibility, and it can be very quickly destroyed in one stroke by something like the Father Kevin Reynolds case."

Collins helped formulate the Irish church's 2003 "Our Children, Our Church" guidelines. She said the emphasis

today is on the principle of "the safety of the child being paramount. It is more important than any other consideration, including the good name of any other individual," she said.

But Father Aodh said he thinks there must be justice for all.

Of his own personal experience of being subject to a false accusation, he recalls: "There are no words to describe it -- it is harrowing beyond words. The very definition of your life is gone because the priesthood isn't just a job, it's a vocation. I didn't feel abandoned by God, but I didn't understand how God had allowed this happen in my life."

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