

Who knew an Irish seminary could be so much like a prison?

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jan. 19, 2012 | Bulletins from the Human Side

NCR received a letter from Msgr. Hugh G Connolly, president of Saint Patrick's College Maynooth, the national seminary of Ireland. Msgr. Connolly objected to this web column by Eugene Kennedy.

Msgr. Connolly requested the opportunity to respond to Kennedy's column. To meet that request, I am printing in full Msgr. Connolly's written statement that gives his account of the changes at the college: [Maynooth seminary head objects to Kennedy's portrayal](#) [1]

Dennis Coday,
NCR Editor

In a story likely to be unsurpassed as what psychologists term an "unobtrusive measure" of what is wrong with the Catholic church in Ireland, its venerable national seminary at Maynooth has decided, [according to *The Irish Catholic*](#) [2], to "separate the seminary environment from the wider university community."

Perhaps it is modeled on the new television series "Alcatraz," in which ghostly former inmates return to the famous prison that is now a cold and empty symbol of the golden age of isolating big-time gangsters like Al Capone from the world they might harm. It was called "the Rock," a nickname given to many seminaries that flourished in a roughly parallel golden age of isolating small-fry seminarians from the world that might harm them.

That was the pre-Vatican II world in which seminarians were prepared for working among men and women by such spurn-the-world spiritual ideals as the famous one from the *Imitation of Christ*: "As often as I have been among men, I have returned less a man."

Seminaries from what the "Reformers of the Reform" view as a Golden Age were, as a waggish priest friend observed, designed in the "early penal style." The recent sale of a Michigan seminary to be converted into a prison does not then surprise us. Old-fashioned seminaries, like traditional jails, were built in remote places with thick walls that enclosed the open, easily supervised spaces in which the residents could circulate during specified periods. (The fact that the seminary referred to them as the *cloister walk* and the prison termed them *the yard* did not really differentiate them much from each other.)

There were also limited visiting hours and, while prisoners may have received cakes with files baked into them with which to plan escapes, seminarians were reminded of the dead-letter character of their confinement by being the final recipients of the fruitcakes that had been circulating untouched for many seasons.

Of course, seminarians did not bang their cups on the tables as the inmates did in prison movies from the same era, and they did not whisper to each other, "Pass it on, there's a break tonight." Seminarians carried out their

own minor subversive activities, such as reading newspapers, which was a punishable offense if discovered by the warden -- I mean, the rector -- who was charged with keeping the seminarians from learning much, if anything, about the world they were supposedly being trained to serve.

Apparently the Irish bishops, whose judgment has been questionable in recent years, have decided the best way to train priests, some of whom are tragically in real prisons for sexually molesting children, is to give them a prison-like experience during their training years. To that end, "separate doors have already been installed in the main cloister to partition the seminarians' living quarters from the rest of the campus to which only members of the seminary community now have keys."

In addition and at no small expense, "a new distinctive entrance to the seminary has also been constructed at the back of the building." Monsignor Hugh Connolly, Maynooth's warden -- I mean, rector -- says he is "trying to get the balance right between the need for the seminary to be a distinctive prayerful community and ensure that the seminarians have all the benefits that the Maynooth campus has to offer."

Connolly confirms he is "bringing forth a proposal to the trustees of the college to create a separate dining room for the seminary community." Is it only a coincidence that they have trustees in prisons as well?

In short, the Irish bishops think they are solving a problem whose roots can be traced back to the isolation from the healthy experiences with others that characterized the supposed golden age before Vatican II spoiled everything by reminding the church that its whole purpose was to embrace the sinful world and relieve its suffering rather than to push it away like a leper whose suffering might contaminate it.

Secular comes from the Latin *saeculum*, which means "age" or "time." Secular priests, such as those to be trained at Maynooth, are meant to be men of their time, men of their age. Priests cannot do that successfully by being shielded from or estranged from their age by keeping them from healthy contacts with the people to whom they are called to dedicate their lives. This step backward, however, is in accord with the reform of the reform that, in countless ways beyond this careless rebuilding of seminary walls, is trying to lead the church back into an age that has less reality to it than the Oz of the children's story.

Or maybe there is another purpose to this sealing the seminarians from contacts with the lay students. The latter are not the dangerous ones; they are the ones who need to be protected with stout walls and strict rules from the seminarians who, if they turn out like many of their predecessors, may abuse them in a desperate search to complete the psychosexual development that was stunted in the kind of closed seminary system that was the problem and that the Irish bishops think is the cure.

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Links: already receive email alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add Kennedy to your list.

[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/29018>

[2] <http://www.irishcatholic.ie/site/content/maynooth-tightens-seminary-life>

[3] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>