

Vatican laments Irish dissent, silences priests

Michael Kelly | Apr. 26, 2012



Fr. Seán McDonagh at a news conference unveiling the Amarach survey April 12 (PA Wire/Niall Carson)

DUBLIN, IRELAND -- Just weeks after a report from a Vatican inquiry into the Irish church lamented what it described as "fairly widespread" dissent from church teaching, it was revealed that the Vatican has "silenced" Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery.

The Holy See's move provoked fury among the members of the 800-strong Association of Catholic Priests, which has accused the Vatican of issuing a fatwa against liberal clerics.

It's not exactly clear why Flannery, a popular author and retreat director, has come under Vatican suspicion. He has voiced support in the past for opening up debates around the ordination of women, a change to the church's ban on artificial birth control and an end to mandatory celibacy. He also provoked dismay among senior Irish bishops when he publicly backed Prime Minister Enda Kenny's 2011 attack on the Vatican in the wake of the report into the mishandling of clerical abuse in the Cloyne diocese. Kenny accused the Vatican of "dysfunction," "disconnection," "elitism" and "narcissism." Flannery described the speech as "wonderful."

By acting against Flannery now, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith may well have scored an own goal by provoking the ire of the priests' association. As well as his retreat work, Flannery is a founder of the association, which now represents some 20 percent of Ireland's clergy. Since its founding less than two years ago, the group has campaigned for liberal reforms in the church and is due to hold a national assembly in early May to harness momentum. Key priorities for the group include "a re-evaluation of Catholic sexual teaching" and "a redesigning of ministry in the Church, in order to incorporate the gifts, wisdom and expertise of the entire faith community, male and female."

Flannery is the latest Irish priest to face Vatican censure. In mid-April, it was revealed that moral theologian Fr. Seán Fagan had been silenced by the Vatican two years ago. His Marist order even took the bizarre step of buying up unsold copies of his 2008 book *What Happened to Sin?*

Capuchin Fr. Owen O'Sullivan also fell foul of the doctrinal congregation in late 2010 after he published an article suggesting that homosexuality is "simply a facet of the human condition."

More of the same is likely to be in the cards given some of the findings of the apostolic visitation, published on March 19. The summary of the document -- oddly, only four of Ireland's 27 serving bishops have seen the full report -- warned that "dissent from the fundamental teachings of the Church is not the authentic path towards renewal."

The tendency "among priests, religious, and laity, to hold theological opinions at variance with the teachings of the Magisterium" required, the visitation concluded, "particular attention directed principally towards improved theological formation."

A war of words has now broken out -- of sorts, since no one of the Vatican side of the argument is speaking at all. Renowned ecologist Fr. Seán McDonagh, a member of the priests' association's leadership team, accused the Holy See of "outrageous" behavior in silencing of the clerics.

He accused the Vatican of "throwing a fatwa" at the priests and said that some of Rome's recent actions were like a return to the Inquisition.

"This isn't the time for heresy-hunting," he warned.

The association has rallied behind Flannery, insisting, "This intervention is unfair, unwarranted and unwise."

The association has also resisted attempts to cast it simply as a liberal pressure group. "The issues surfaced by the ACP since its foundation less than two years ago and by Tony Flannery as part of the leadership team are not an attack on or a rejection of the fundamental teachings of the Church. Rather they are an important reflection by an association of over 800 Irish priests -- who have given long service to the Catholic Church in Ireland -- on issues surfacing in parishes all over the country," the group said in a statement.

A recent survey commissioned by the association seems to demonstrate that the priests are not the Irish church's only restive members. While weekly Mass attendance is still relatively high, three out of four people who identify themselves as Catholic say they find the church's teaching on sexuality "irrelevant."

The survey -- conducted by the respected research association Amarach -- also showed that almost 90 percent of those surveyed believe that divorced or separated Catholics in a stable second relationship ought to be able to receive Communion at Mass.

The figures were compiled from a sample of 1,000 Catholics and, according to researchers, have a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

According to the results, 35 percent of those surveyed attend Mass at least once a week; 51 percent attend at least once a month. Just 5 percent of Irish people who identify themselves as Catholics never attend Mass.

Eighty-seven percent disagreed with church teaching on an unmarried priesthood and said they believed that the church ought to allow priests to get married, while 77 percent said the church should admit women to the priesthood.

When asked "to what extent do you agree with the Catholic church's teaching that any sexual expression of love between a gay couple is immoral," 61 percent said they disagreed while 18 percent of those surveyed believed homosexual acts to be immoral.

Seeming to set himself on a collision course with the Vatican, McDonagh said the survey "confirms that those who are advocating for change in the church are not a tiny minority, but are, in fact, at the heart of the church."

He said Irish Catholics are 'crying out for change and do not want the church to go backward, but to move forward and change.'

A spokesman for the Irish bishops' conference, pointedly not commenting directly on the findings, said, 'The results of this survey confirm the importance of all in the church taking up this task in a spirit of communion and sharing the good news of the Gospel in a rapidly changing social and cultural environment in Ireland today.'

The Vatican seems to be drawing a clear line in the sand. From Rome's point of view, whatever the future shape of Irish Catholicism will be, it must be a future marked by greater adherence to church teaching. The Association of Catholic Priests strikes a decidedly different note. This Vatican approach, it warns, 'may have the unintended effect of exacerbating a growing perception of a significant 'disconnect' between the Irish church and Rome.'

[Michael Kelly is deputy editor of *The Irish Catholic*, an independent, lay-owned weekly newspaper.]

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