

The Apostolic Visitation in Ireland: The Real Agenda

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The brief report on the Apostolic Visitation carried out in Ireland by five senior prelates summarizes an exercise in irrelevancy. A good part of the report describes the process and who the visitators met with. One wonders if they heard what was said to them especially by the victims and their families, or if they merely listened with a view to formulating excuses. The report makes the usual, expected remarks: apologies to the victims, blame directed at the bishops and religious superiors, praise for steps taken by the Irish Church since 1990, more praise for all that the bishops and religious superiors have done for victims and whining that the bishops have felt isolated while confronted with waves of indignation.

The five prelates were not interested in digging beneath the surface of the clerical culture to determine *why* the horrendous epidemic of sexual and physical violation of the innocent occurred. Rather, they appear to have looked around for excuses rather than accurate explanations. The sexual abuse crisis in Ireland and everywhere else for that matter is not primarily about sexual molestation. It's about the hierarchy's obsession with power and about the deep corruption and stagnation of the clerical culture. The visitators were no doubt unwilling and quite possibly incapable of piercing the thick protective veil that covers the institutional Church, a veil that prevents them from seeing and absorbing that the reason the clericalized Irish Catholic culture is unraveling and the reason for the profound disruption of "communion" between the hierarchy, including the Vatican, and the Irish people, is the total lack of accountability on the part of the authoritarian model of the church that is at the root of the present crisis.

Ireland did not need a handful of foreign archbishops to tell them that countless young people were viciously abused by the most trusted and most powerful people in the community. Nor did they need to be insulted with the claim that the "shortcomings of the past" caused an inadequate understanding of the "terrible phenomenon of the abuse of minors." The people have voiced time and again their opinions: the overbearing, secretive

clerical culture, the lopsided theology of sexuality, seminary training disconnected from the real world and the “Church’s” obsession with controlling everything. These are not the shortcomings of the past. They are the deadly symptoms of the present.

The report speaks of “structures and procedures” that will ensure that the tragedy of abuse will never be repeated. This is a typical Vatican response to a complex problem they can’t understand much less control: impose more bureaucratic programs that may change the surface appearance while the core only continues to get worse. It’s much like trying to solve a hardware problem with a software solution.

The visitators claimed that “beginning with the Bishops and religious superiors, much attention and care has been shown to the victims, both in terms of spiritual and psychological assistance...” This outrageous assertion is followed by the recommendation that bishops and superiors meet with and listen to victims. That this has to be recommended is a pathetic indictment of the bishops’ sense of compassionate pastoral care. If the leadership’s first concern from the outset had been the victims and not the image and power of the ecclesiastical establishment the course of recent Catholic history in Ireland would have been dramatically different.

The report confirms that the visitation of the seminaries avoided getting at the real issue: can priests be prepared to serve in the real world by spending years of formation in an unreal world. The superficial recommendations only serve to try and recapture a seminary culture that inculcated the toxic belief that priests are apart from others because of their exalted “calling.” Anyone who has been involved with survivors for even the shortest period of time knows that this unrealistic, arrogant attitude is a major part of the problem and surely not part of the solution.

The second half of the report tells the real story. The guiding agenda is not that of the victims, past present and future. The real agenda is trying to rescue the Irish clerical institution from its descent into irrelevance by imposing a return to the model of Church as monarchy. The “renewed call to communion” sounds too much like a renewed call to docile, unthinking submission. Catholics in Ireland are walking away from the institution not because they need a “deeper formation in the content of the faith” but because they are making a distinction between faith in God and childish obedience to a clerical establishment that feeds on control.

Contrary to the report, the younger generation needs the new Ecclesial Movements as much as a duck hunter needs an accordion. These new

movements are nothing more than agents for the return to a model of church that welcomed the chains of clerical control and banished intellectual creativity and theological self-determination as if they were a disease. The abominable legacy of sexual, physical and spiritual abuse in the Irish church has nothing to do with orthodoxy and fidelity to the pope. On the contrary it has everything to do with a destructive clerical culture that sacrificed the innocence of vulnerable children for the distorted image and power of the hierarchy.

The Apostolic Visitation was a reaction to a problem the Vatican could not control or fix because *it* was a major part of the cause. The visitors would not delve into the core issue because to do so would have meant the recognition of the dark side of the institutional church. The solutions offered: obedience to the hierarchy and lock-step assent to official doctrine are irrelevant but worse, are an insult to the countless men and women whose lives were shattered because of this very model of church.

The words and actions of Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, and Taoiseach Enda Kenny's laser sharp assessment of the Vatican culture in his speech to the Dail Eireann last July, are proof that the real Church in Ireland has accurately assessed the situation. The Vatican could have made unprecedented progress in restoring the Church's image by listening and learning.