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Tracing the cultural legacy of Irish Catholicism

From Galway to Cloyne and beyond

Edited by Eamon Maher and Eugene O'Brien

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Irreconcilable differences? The fraught relationship between women and the Catholic Church in Ireland

Sharon Tighe-Mooney

Introduction

In the introduction to *From Prosperity to Austerity*, Eamon Maher and Eugene O'Brien write, in the context of attempts to voice caution during the Irish boom, that the consensus between government, the media and business interests held 'that anyone who opposed the current ideology was against progress, was rooted in the past, or was incapable of seeing the benefits to all of our exceptional prosperity' (2014: 5). The Catholic Church was in no position to voice its concern about these developments at the time, in the wake of the child-abuse and Magdalene laundry revelations. Moreover, the response in the public forum to the litany of Church-related offences has been to reject the institutional Church and, consequently, impede the creation of a space for the evaluation of the cultural legacy of Irish Catholicism. As a result, attempting to explore aspects of the Catholic Church without falling into outright condemnation of the entire institution and of its members is deemed insular, 'against progress' and 'rooted in the past'. It can be argued that the public rejection of Catholic Church teaching is an attempt at individual reassertion and autonomy in the wake of discovering that the institution in which we placed our faith and trust has been found undeserving of that faith and trust. Yet to ignore the legacy of the Catholic Church in Ireland is to deny the most enduring and forceful facet in the shaping of Irish society.

In an interview in 2002, the well-known writer John McGahern (1934–2006) remarked, 'Ireland is a peculiar society in the sense that it was a nineteenth century society up to about 1970 and then it almost bypassed the twentieth century' (*The Guardian*, 6 January 2002). That 'peculiarity' is most evident when it comes to the rapid nature of change in family life. Ireland has changed from a largely homogenous society, loyal to the tenets of Catholicism, to a multicultural society with access to contraception and divorce, in a remarkably short space of time. Indeed, the role of women at the heart of that change, given the strong relationship between women and the Catholic Church in the past, has yet to be fully appreciated. Additionally, while there have been important cultural advances for women in terms of their role in society, the one institution that has not altered its perception of women to any great degree is the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, scripture is used by the teaching authority of the Church to uphold women's secondary status and exclusion from ministry in the Catholic Church.

This chapter will examine the main events of the past thirty-five years in the context of the weakening hegemony of the Catholic Church in juxtaposition with the growing awareness by Catholic women that they had framed their lives by edicts promulgated by a celibate male-dominated institution that had supported double standards in an area in which it was most vocal. The consequences of this ethos have been traumatic, with generations of Irish women in particular having paid a heavy price in terms of the approximately thirty childbearing years of their lives that were framed by a strict regime of enforced selflessness and a system of severe penury for those who did not conform. I will begin with a brief overview of the historical context of the relationship between women, priests and religious and then examine how evolving mores were framed by an issue about which the Church was particularly vocal, namely contraception, which reflects the conflict between the Church and women for control of the female body. Major events, such as the death of Ann Lovett and the Kerry Babies controversy, as well as the accounts of moving or weeping statues of Our Lady, will be contextualised in an attempt to give readers a feel for the *Zeitgeist* of the time. Then I will turn my attention to the ordination of women, the interdiction of which, in my view, seeks to exclude women from leadership roles in the institution and, furthermore, is a stance that is at odds with contemporary society. The reiteration of the Church's position on this teaching in 2010 will be considered in the wake of the contemporaneous revelations of wrongdoing by some church personnel: Bishop Eamon Casey, Fr Michael Cleary and the child-abuse scandals. Finally, a survey conducted by sociologist, Betty Hilliard, that frames this thirty-year period, will be utilised to discuss how the lives of Irish women were particularly affected by Church teaching and how attitudes changed, especially in relation to the unquestioning obedience to Church teaching.

The historical context

It is an historical fact, Mary Kenny writes, that 'no one has forged, sustained, or upheld the faith of Catholic Ireland more purposefully than the women of Ireland' (2000: 11). The relationship between church personnel and women developed from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Priests and nuns

took an interest in what women were doing, and the Church, Tony Fahey argues, promoted 'a familial piety which reflected the increasing nuclearisation of the family and the growing importance of women as the moral centres of family life' (1992: 263). The family was important, therefore, because it provided the space for the socialisation of the future members of society. In that capacity, the Irish mother played a crucial role in the development of modern Irish society, a development that was heavily influenced by the Church. The Catholic Church world view held that in the home, woman exercised the 'natural' vocation for which nature had intended her. Moreover, she imitated the toil and self-denial of priests and nuns, thereby fostering vocations among her children or resigning them to the limitations of life in Ireland at that time. In the Catholic Church ethos, therefore, women had a defined role; that of mother, nurturer and carer of the family. It was, in short, a vocation. In this way, Irish mothers became the propagators of the faith both in the home and in the community. In *Moral Monopoly*, Tom Inglis describes how this role was central to both the continuation of the Catholic ethos and the acceptance of the limited roles offered by society in the early twentieth century (1998: 178–200).

The Irish State, underpinned by the 1937 Constitution that embraced Catholic social teaching in terms of the family and women's place in the family as mother, was slow to embrace any semblance of autonomy for Irish women. This included the right to regulate fertility. With the assertion of 'natural law' (or 'God's law') promulgated by the Church, and upheld by the ban on contraception enacted by the Fianna Fáil government in 1935, no forum for discussion about contraception was possible in Ireland. A study conducted by Betty Hilliard, in the 1970s and again in 2000 in Cork City as part of a project on family research, interviewed women who had become mothers in the 1950s and 1960s. What is striking about the study is that the questions posed were not specifically on the topic of sexuality. Rather, as Hilliard wrote, 'most of the following material emerged in response to a very general question about life when these women were rearing young children' (2004: 139). A significant theme among the participants was motherhood as the central role of women's lives, as well as the experience of high birth rates. Hilliard remarked, 'In talking about their experiences of sexuality, motherhood and the Church, the respondents painted a picture of domination, ignorance and fear' (2004: 139). A notable finding that emerged from the study was a very poor understanding of the actual process of childbirth as, Hilliard was told, it was a topic that was not discussed. This created a culture of fear about childbirth, about pregnancy itself and of the risks of continuous childbearing. For these women, therefore, the reproductive aspect dominated sexual activity, and intercourse was beset with fear.

Hilliard's study reflects the long-lasting and deep-rooted sway that the Church had exercised over the institution of motherhood. The physical consequences of sex were entirely women's responsibility. As women's value in the Catholic Church world view is intrinsically linked to motherhood, the physical

demands of repeated pregnancies on women were of little concern to the male hierarchy.[1] Prioritising motherhood over other concerns such as the health of both mother and child, or whether there were adequate material provisions available, led to much suffering and hardship for generations of Irish women who were deprived of access to artificial forms of contraception. This edict was ruthlessly enforced as can be gauged by the comments of many respondents in Hilliard's study who reported being refused absolution in confession for voicing concerns about risking another pregnancy due to poverty or ill health. The Irish State upheld Catholic Church teachings by banning the use of contraceptives, as well as written material giving information about or alluding to contraception. Consequently, securing legal autonomy in this regard was not an easy matter. Hilliard noted, 'Although there were some references to political figures, power and control were almost universally associated with religion by respondents' (2004: 155). This reflects the power of the Church in affecting state regulations in this regard.

On the matter of contraception, there was great expectation of a change of heart from the Vatican in the 1960s. However, expectations were not fulfilled. In his encyclical, *Humanae vitae* (1968), Pope Paul VI (1963–78) reaffirmed traditional Church teaching and stated that preventing pregnancy by abstinence was the only acceptable means of contraception, because in abstinence, 'the married couple rightly use a faculty provided them by nature' (Section 16). In this way, the merits of celibacy predominate the issues of childbearing and human sexuality. In addition, although women are mentioned in the body of the encyclical, they are not specifically greeted, blessed nor addressed directly in their emotional and physical role as bearers of children. The Vatican would seem to have made its judgement without actually 'seeing' the women at whom the issue was targeted. The response from the 'faithful' was disbelief and disappointment. At the same time, Kenny writes that even in the aftermath of the first wave of the feminist movement in the 1960s, 'the Catholic view that God and nature intended sexual intercourse to be fruitful was quite widely held as a correct principle, even if it was not always practiced or observed' (2000: 127). While on the one hand faith in the sustenance of the Catholic Church ideology of welcoming all new life was the ideal; on the other hand, much human suffering was involved, especially for females. As well as the physical and emotional demands on mothers, decades of poverty and sustained emigration had shown that God did not always provide. The dichotomous situation was arguably best summed up by the writer Kate O'Brien. In *Pray for the Wanderer*, Nell Mahoney ponders 'the binding vows and obligations of marriage', a rite that has the procreation of children as its primary aim. Her thoughts reflect the dilemma of the Catholic believer, as she 'could not admit, any more by her fastidious nerves than by her religious training, the pitiful exigencies or crude materialistic ethic of birth control – though baffled indeed, too, by the appalling problems and horrors of unchecked fecundity' (1951: 109). Ultimately, as Chrystel Hug remarks, 'in this domain, Catholic morality was particularly cut

off from the reality of contraceptive practice, which accounts for its demise' (1999: 9). The topic of contraception, therefore, put into doubt, for the first time, the validity of Church teaching.

While a robust Catholic society was still evident when John Paul II (1978–2005) visited Ireland in 1979, gradual changes in state law had begun. Jenny Beale notes, 'Issues relating to the changing status of women have acted as focal points for controversy over the wider changes in values and attitudes in Irish society' (1986: viii). In early 1971, Mary Robinson, then a senator, attempted to introduce a Bill proposing to liberalise the law on contraception. The Bill was not allowed a reading in the Seanad, and so it could not be discussed. In fact, she had to make seven attempts in total before being successful (Hug 1999: 94). In May 1971, a group of Irish feminists caused quite a stir when they travelled to Belfast by train and returned to Dublin with contraceptive devices in order to demonstrate the illogical nature of the law. In 1973, the Supreme Court agreed that while there was a constitutional right to marital privacy that allowed for the use of contraceptives, the Act forbidding their import or sale was, nevertheless, not repugnant to the Constitution. In other words, contraceptives could be used legally but not obtained legally. As a result of this anomaly, a series of Bills was proposed, but the enthusiasm to see them through appeared to be lacking in the Irish government. Eventually, in 1978, and largely due to the consistent work for women's reproductive rights by Mary Robinson, Charles Haughey introduced the Health (Family Planning) Bill. In this Bill, which became an Act in 1979, contraceptives could be prescribed by doctors on medical grounds and obtained in selected pharmacies. It was, therefore, extremely restrictive, but at least it was now under the remit of the Department of Health rather than the Department of Justice, which removed any former criminal associations from the issue of contraception.

The movement of discussion about these matters from the private to the public sphere was facilitated by a new afternoon radio programme, *Women Today*, first broadcast on 31 May 1979. This show, which allowed women to speak about issues of concern in their lives, together with the iconic broadcaster Gay Byrne's vital role in facilitating public discussion of formerly taboo topics, meant that for the first time people started hearing about the lives of ordinary people. Additionally, journalists such as Nell McCafferty and Gene Kerrigan, who have been writing political commentaries since the 1970s, continued to highlight issues of concern, such as the Kerry Babies case.[2] In this way, personal stories that had been formerly masked by collective ideology began to emerge. The effects on women of state legislation and church edicts were verbalised, and the predominant mood was that women had had enough. However, when John Paul II visited Ireland, the year after his appointment to the papacy, the idea that motherhood should be a woman's only role in life was still to the fore. In his address at Shannon Airport on the day of his departure, the Pope said, 'May Irish mothers, young women and girls not listen to those who tell them that working at a secular job, succeeding in

a secular profession, is more important than the vocation of giving life and caring for this life as a mother' (John Paul II 1979: 80–1). This continues to be the Vatican position. Many women, however, were no longer willing to be defined merely by this one aspect of their lives.

While great enthusiasm was displayed for the papal visit, it was arguably more about seeing and hearing a world-famous figure than acting as a marker for the renewal of Catholic devotion. James S. Donnelly remarks, 'Indeed, the openly acknowledged purpose of the Irish hierarchy in inviting John Paul to Ireland was largely that of halting or at least slowing the damaging inroads of materialism and secularism on the attachment of Catholics to their ancient faith' (2002: 271). Additionally, in his memoir *Staring at Lakes*, Michael Harding writes:

> In some ways, the papal visit was the funeral of Catholicism in Ireland. After the cheers of the assembled millions had died away … Irish society found that it couldn't really stomach the harsh tone of Rome's teachings and bit by bit went off to gorge and be lost in a frenzy of secular self-improvement. (2013: 97–8)

The signs of decline had been there from the 1960s, as noted by the writer Desmond Fennell, who argues that there was no reason why decline in belief, as had happened in Europe, would not be mirrored in Ireland. As literacy, education and advances in science and technology facilitated an increase in living standards, Christianity had been abandoned. Fennell's thesis is that the Church had failed to understand the new developments and, moreover, had failed to frame the changing society in a Christian context. His reasoning, it can be argued, was borne out by the subsequent issuing of *Humanae vitae*, which was another example of, as Fennell puts it, a 'failure to know the times' (1962). The Church also failed to appreciate the changing role of women in society. Additionally, another aspect of the feminist movement that had an impact on the relationship between women and the Church was access to education. Women began to read scripture for themselves; they could now study theology and could communicate with women around the world. The Catholic Church's ambivalent attitude towards women could now be seen in the interpretations of scripture written by men over the centuries on the subject of women. This knowledge and awareness, combined with the sexual revolution, in the view of Mary T. Malone, 'often stretched the relationships between women and their churches to breaking point' (2000: 22). In addition, as women became involved in all aspects of public life, their almost total exclusion from the organisational arm of the Catholic Church began to rankle.

The signs of the alienation of women from the Catholic Church from the time of the Pope's visit onwards can be suggested by their engagement in areas that were intrinsic to Church teaching. In 1979, the Family Planning (Health) Act to legalise contraception, albeit in very limited terms, was enacted and came into law the following year. Also in 1979, the Censorship Board's authority to ban books about or referring to contraception was withdrawn. The relationship

between women and the Catholic Church at this point was succinctly described thus by Tom Inglis:

> In terms of maintaining its power, the problem for the Catholic Church was that once women began to gain control of their bodies ... the bonds that tied them to the home and rearing children gradually loosened. As that happened, the consolation and compensatory power which the Church in Ireland provided for women over the last hundred years was no longer as necessary because they were able to gain entry to the positions, resources and prestige to which they have previously been denied access. (1998: 63)

There is little doubt that many of the changes in Irish society were driven by women. Moreover, it can be argued that the issue of contraception best reflects the initial gap between lived experience and ideology and, in the aftermath of *Humanae vitae*, doubt as to the credibility of Church teaching began to feature in the Irish cultural psyche.

In the 1980s, a series of events exposed the cultural hegemonic Catholic landscape to the rigours of a conflict between physical reality and spiritual ideology, particularly in relation to the policing of female sexuality.

Church, State, women and the 1980s

By 1980, limited contraception was available. In 1982, the first minister of state for women's affairs and family law was appointed. Nuala Fennell (1935–2009) had worked as a freelance journalist and was a staunch advocate of women's rights.[3] In 1983, an amendment to the Constitution was passed by referendum seeking to prevent any possible legalisation of abortion and instating equal status in law to a mother and her foetus. The bitterness of the campaign was a reaction to the perception of a growing loosening of the bond between church and people. One of the most damaging consequences for women was the new discourse that positioned them as a potential threat to the unborn child; in other words, as potential killers of innocent babies.[4] This was the context that preceded the death of Ann Lovett and the Kerry Babies fiasco, both of which occurred in 1984.

In February 2014, Maynooth University held an event to mark the thirty-year anniversary of the death of Ann Lovett in Granard, Co. Longford, on 31 January 1984. Christy Moore performed 'The Middle of the Island', a song he had recorded with Sinéad O'Connor and which evolved from lyrics sent to him by Nigel Rolfe under the title, 'The Ostrich'. The opening line, which is repeated in the song, captures the cultural focus on sexuality, in terms of the policing of female sexuality, and, at the same time, the silence surrounding the topic: 'Everybody knew, nobody said.' Moore writes that the song is not only a memorial to Ann Lovett, who is not named, but a reminder of 'young girls left to die in cold stone grottos while a country kneels at the altar, like an ostrich' (2000: 28). Ann Lovett

died after giving birth to her son in a grotto dedicated to the Virgin Mary. In the absence of being able to seek or accept help, she had turned to a statue that symbolises the ultimate loving mother, albeit one that is wholly unconnected with sex or sexuality.

Given that this was not an immaculate conception, the father of Ann's baby escaped national notoriety. There was little impetus to force men to confront the consequences of pre-marital sex in either practicable or public terms. It was women and their children who were incarcerated as well as vilified by church and society. 'Purity', as the most important attribute of the Catholic woman, in imitation of the mother of Jesus, has a long history in the Church. Moreover, the control of sexual behaviour was a feature of Irish nationalism from the nineteenth century onwards and was accentuated after Independence in the drive for the moral and cultural uniqueness of the newly independent Irish people. Thus, church, state and society, all of the opinion that the threat to sexual morality resided in the bodies of women, ensured that females who did not conform to the ideal Irish woman were rendered invisible. As Marjorie Howes notes, 'Irish culture has long had, for better or worse, a keen sense of the public determinants and consequences of the apparently private realm of sexuality' (2002: 923). The organs of 'public consequences' were particularly oppressive for Irish women.

Ann Lovett's death marked a shift in mood. People asked themselves what kind of society would allow a young girl and her baby to suffer such a fate. The answer was a Catholic-dominated one, in which, as Inglis argues, status was tied up with the public participation in Catholic ritual and the need to be deemed respectable (1998: 11). In response to the deaths of Ann and her son, hundreds of letters were sent to the *Gay Byrne Show* on RTÉ radio. Women wrote about their experiences and described previously untold stories of pregnancy outside marriage. As a result of the volume of letters received, Byrne dedicated an entire show to the reading of women's experiences. Indeed, the facilitation of the stories on the national airwaves ensured that not only were these topics no longer taboo but that the human cost to maintaining the façade of Catholic respectability was articulated.

In April that same year, the Joanne Hayes story, involving the death of two babies, broke. At the end of the year, in December 1984, the Kerry Babies Tribunal was set up, with, it should be noted, all-male investigating, legal and expert teams.[5] Similarly, as with the case of Ann Lovett, the proceedings emphasised how much the focus was on women in these situations. In other words, although the responsibility for sexual morality was largely vested in women, it was enforced by men, in both Church and State. The remit was to investigate why Ms Hayes had confessed to giving birth to a second child found near Cahirciveen, almost fifty miles away from her home. Instead, the Tribunal turned into an investigation and demonisation of Joanne Hayes. The vitriol and hostility expressed towards certain women anxious to assert their rights in relation to birth control and the equal right to life of the mother and child, during the 1983 constitutional referendum on abortion,

now had a visible target. Worryingly, however, the death of two babies, both of whom were assumed to be Joanne's, appeared to be of far less interest than the extra-marital affair from which they allegedly arose.

Wider access to contraception, in that contraceptive devices were made legally available to all, including unmarried persons, was legalised in 1985, the year after these events. The final vote had taken place in the Dáil at the end of February. How much Ann Lovett's death and the vilification of Joanne Hayes influenced this outcome is open to speculation as it had taken over fifteen years to achieve. While on the one hand the loosening of the bonds between Catholic Church teaching and Irish society appeared inevitable in the wake of accounts of the deaths of young girls and newborn babies, as well as the legalisation of contraception, on the other hand, a curious phenomenon took place that suggests that the break from long-held belief in and obedience to Catholic teaching was problematic.

The moving statues phenomenon reinforces the opposing factions of an evolving liberal and secular society marked by uncertainty and a strongly held belief system that dealt in absolutes, framed by a strong unquestioning adherence to Catholic teaching. As Margaret MacCurtain notes, 'a familiar system of Catholic representation, the Marian wayside shrine, became the vehicle for interpreting the moral anxiety that engulfed Catholic believers in the aftermath of the angry exchanges that accompanied the 1983 Eighth Amendment to the Constitution' (2008: 161). From February to September 1985, there were over thirty accounts of moving or weeping statues of Our Lady. The most famous one is the moving statue of Ballinspittle, Co. Cork, which is near Kinsale, but the first alleged event took place in Asdee, Co. Kerry, just two months after the Kerry Babies Tribunal had been set up. As the most popular figure in folk religion, a renewed devotion to Mary, the perfect female icon and loving chaste mother, was particularly relevant in the context of abortion and the portrayal of Joanne Hayes, who, as Tom Inglis notes, 'was made into a kind of exotic, sexual predator, who was not just very different from other Irish women, but represented a threat to them and to every decent Irish man' (2003: 222).

With the Church being particularly vocal on the issues of sex and the control of women's bodies, the institutional Church was failing to meet the religious needs of the people as provider of access to the transcendent. In some ways, the apparitions were a response to this gap in a folk-religious sort of way.[6] There were claims of healings by people who visited the sites. Many saw the face of Our Lady of Ballinspittle change to that of either Jesus or Padre Pio. Others saw the 5 foot 8 inch concrete statue rock from side to side. By early August, some 100,000 people had visited the grotto in Co. Cork.[7] While this suggests a show of religious piety, Eamon McCann found that the mood at the grotto in Ballinspittle was matter-of-fact and, furthermore, that nobody expressed a view of the events as transformative. Rather, the experience appeared to suggest a deep yearning for reassurance that faith in God was justified (McCann 1985: 33–7). The fact

that so many people, and women in particular, collectively imagined or felt that they had experienced something mystical at various grottoes around the country, suggests a subconscious plea for reassurance about the 'rightness' of adhering to the rigid regulation of the body in light of the public discourse, discussion and bitter exchanges around what Nell McCafferty termed, 'the war of the wombs' (1985a: 58). The phenomenon of the moving statues in one way served to reassert the comfort and security of long-held beliefs. Then again, the effects, if any, were brief, and, as McCann found, not 'transformative'.

In 1984 and 1985, therefore, the clash between cultural and religious ideology and the move towards an individual interpretation of religious ethics and morals was played out to an unprecedented degree in the public forum. There is little doubt that these events had focused, to a degree hitherto unseen and unheard in public, on individual personal consequences in terms of the Church's theology of sexuality. In the context of Catholic teaching, females such as Joanne Hayes and Ann Lovett had transgressed the very essence of the perfect Irish Catholic woman, modelled on the Virgin Mary: self-sacrificing, subservient and all-loving, and largely disinterested in sex. At the same time, they also embodied the dichotomous dilemma of the Irish Catholic female, esteemed as a married mother, shamed and vilified as an unmarried one and otherwise of no great import. The Catholic Church's implicit attitude was, and still is, that women are valued for their contribution to the perpetuation of the faith, for their role as mothers (married only) and as carers of others. In her self-sacrificing, vocational role as mother, the Catholic woman has neither the right nor the expectation of any other means of fulfilment. Up to the 1980s, wider society perpetuated this world view. However, the events outlined above provoked questions about aspects of Church teaching in the context of Irish societal values. In the decade to follow, the recounting of the physical, mental and sexual abuse visited upon women and children by church personnel in industrial schools and Magdalene laundries would serve to loosen the bond between the Church and the women of Ireland even further.

Church, State, women and the 1990s

The right to autonomy, begun by Irish women in the 1970s and persisted with throughout the 1980s, began to come to fruition in the 1990s. This also signalled the growing chasm between women and the Church as the series of referendums that took place in Ireland directly contravened Church teaching. At the same time, the pull between tradition and change featured strongly. In 1990, Mary Robinson, a known proponent of women's rights, was elected as president of Ireland. In May 1992, it was revealed that the revered Bishop Eamon Casey had fathered a son. This was a pivotal moment in the perception of the Church as moral authority. In November 1992, a referendum was held in the wake of the 'X Case' on three abortion-related issues. The right to travel and the right

to information were upheld. The following year, the fathering of two children by the well-known 'singing priest' Fr Michael Cleary was reported, just after his death. In 1995, the referendum legalising access to divorce was carried. In October 1997, Mary Robinson was succeeded by Mary McAleese as president of Ireland.

Legally, women now had the ability to make decisions about their bodies, their marriages and their lives both outside of and within the context of family matters, about which Pope John Paul II had spoken so passionately during his 1979 visit. Moreover, the gradual shift in cultural views about women meant that participating in all aspects of life was no longer taboo. Motherhood was no longer the only defining factor of a woman's life. She could now also be considered as a person in her own right. In the church context, the remaining years of this decade were framed by a series of revelations of physical and sexual abuse by clerics and religious. By the end of the 1990s, the most influential and important institution in Ireland, the Catholic Church, had been shown to be seriously deficient in human kindness and to be incapable of or indeed unwilling to police its own ethos of sexual morality, as well as showing itself to be largely indifferent to the people its personnel had abused. Moreover, there was little expression of sincere remorse for the shortcomings that had been exposed. Rather, the Church was eventually compelled to address the situation by outside forces. The most important aspect of a relationship, trust, had been broken.

Since Vatican II, the dignity of the human person and the equality of all the faithful are stated core principles of the Catholic Church, 'no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex' (Vatican II 1965: 13). However, rather than concerning themselves with the series of unfolding scandals across the world, as well as in Ireland, or indeed attempting to explain to Catholics why such penury had been visited on those who were regarded as having transgressed by a church founded on the principles of love and forgiveness, John Paul II decided to act on the issue of women and ministry in the Catholic Church. The Pope reiterated the thoughts of Paul VI who had addressed the question in 1976, on foot of the Vatican's Pontifical Biblical Commission being unable, after examining scripture, to answer the question one way or another.[8] In the apostolic letter, *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone), John Paul II employed his full authority to put an end to the discussion: 'I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful.' Just a few months after the publication of *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, the record of offences committed by Fr Brendan Smyth across Ireland, the UK and the USA, stretching back to the 1950s, was revealed. Smyth was a prolific paedophile who used his position of trust to rape and sexually assault dozens of young children over a forty-year period.

Three years later, John Paul II took further action on the questioning of Church teaching by issuing an apostolic letter *Ad tuendam fidem* (To Defend the Faith), which is a document issued on the Pope's own initiative (*motu proprio*) and personally signed by him. The document authorised key additions to the code of Canon Law, and a number of changes were implemented. Changes to canon law are quite rare, and in past centuries there have been only a few such alterations. In any case, John Paul II opened the letter by stating that the changes were needed to 'protect the faith of the Catholic Church against errors arising from certain members of the Christian faithful'. This was in response to the many Roman Catholic theologians and religious personnel who had questioned Church teachings on topics such as female ordination, priestly celibacy, artificial methods of birth control and homosexuality. In this way, discussion and debate about how to confront the changing mores were firmly suppressed. This left little room for Catholics, either lay, professed or ordained, to discuss and debate openly the role of Catholicism in a changing world. Fennell's thesis about the Church's failings in this regard, made almost thirty years earlier, seemed prescient. A year later, in 1999, RTÉ broadcast a three-part documentary, *States of Fear*, made by Mary Raftery. The series detailed the sustained abuse suffered by children in Church-run industrial and reformatory schools in Ireland between the 1930s and the 1970s. By the end of the decade, therefore, rather than offering a model for the Christian message of love and forgiveness, the absolute moral authority had been found to be highly immoral at times.

Church, State, women and the 2000s

As the new millennium dawned, Ireland was a very different society from the one that Pope John Paul II had encountered in 1979. Women had achieved legal rights, more personal autonomy and the right to participate in the public sphere. In 2004, Mary McAleese was re-elected president of Ireland. In the context of the Catholic Church, the issue of abuse continued to dominate the public forum. Indeed, these scandals proved to be a major turning point for the participants in Hilliard's study of family and motherhood undertaken in the 1970s, and again in 2000. Hilliard concluded her study by noting that among the respondents there had been 'changes in thinking and practice' in the intervening twenty-five years. She remarked that by the time of the second interview: 'a new degree of reflexivity and awareness appears to have developed; in particular an awareness of having been dominated by forces outside themselves which had far-reaching effects on some of the most intimate aspects of their lives, including fertility, sexual relations and religious practice' (Hilliard 2004: 154). In other words, revelations of sexual abuse, impropriety and immorality had further fractured the relationship between women and the institutional Church. These accounts, as well as the experience of incidents of humiliation, embarrassment and censure in the confession box in the context of their sexuality, Hilliard wrote, 'significantly coloured and in cases changed respondents' relationships with the Church' (2004: 149).

In 2010, Benedict XVI (2005–13) updated *Normae de gravioribus delictis*, a document originally composed by Pope John Paul II in 2001 that contains a series of regulations or 'norms' and lists the most serious 'crimes' identified by the Church. In the introduction to the modifications, Cardinal William Levada listed the new additions, which include the following: 'The attempted ordination of a woman has also been introduced as a delict in the new text, as established by the decree of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on 19 December 2007.' A delict is a crime or violation of canon law. As Fiona Govan explains in *The Telegraph*, 'Women attempting to be priests, and those who try to ordain them, already faced automatic excommunication but the new decree enshrines the action as "a crime against sacraments"' (*The Telegraph*, 15 July 2010). The same body charged with investigating child-abuse cases was now in charge of investigating the 'crime against sacraments' that included any actions in terms of women and the priesthood. The Church, therefore, was focused on the shoring up of tradition rather than on introspection or a questioning of its practices. Given the zealousness with which the suppression of debate about women and the priesthood, among other topics, was dealt with by the Church, in contrast to the lacklustre approach to child-abuse investigations, Catholic women could not fail to see the extent of their exclusion. Additionally, on top of the penury visited upon 'erring' women and children and the often-harsh face of the Church with regard to people's intimate lives in the past, continuing to attend church services constitutes a moral dilemma for many women who feel a loyalty to their faith but not to the institutional Church.[9]

Hilliard noted the following transition in loyalty to Church teaching in the years that separated the questioning of her participants: 'A clear shift took place in the basis of morality; this was a movement away from a pre-existing moral order propounded by the Church, towards a more individualistic morality based on a greater confidence in the legitimacy of one's own experience' (2004: 159). In the findings of a 2012 *Amárach* survey, commissioned by the Association of Catholic Priests in Ireland, the growing distance between Church teaching and societal practice is also recorded: '3 in 4 find the Church's teaching on sexuality irrelevant to them and/or their family. [...] The younger age cohorts are the least likely to find the teachings pertinent to them' (*Amárach* 2012: 34). Additionally, at a recent presentation, Mary T. Malone recounted that young women see the Church as at best irrelevant and at worst evil. She also related that repeated studies have shown that in the main, religious faith and creeds are passed on by mothers and grandmothers (Malone 2015). While an older female cohort remains loyal to the Catholic faith, and I would argue that this is often in spite of the institutional Church, their daughters are not taking up the baton of propagating the faith. There is little doubt that unless the Vatican engages with female Catholics, both religious and lay, the propagation of the faith cannot be assured.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to trace the trajectory of the decline of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the women of Ireland. The 1980s were tumultuous in this regard as the changing status of women both fuelled and served as a site for cultural change in Irish society. Moreover, the tug of war between the Church and women centred on the issue of bodily autonomy, with *Humane vitae* serving as the watershed document that provoked debate about birth control around the world. The response in Ireland to the encyclical was more muted, but it marked the beginning of the separation between Church teaching and private practice. Moreover, the public discussions in the 1980s about Ann Lovett and Joanne Hayes, and the many other women who told similar stories of being pregnant outside of marriage, moved the debate from the realm of Catholic ideology to lived reality. For many women and their children, the 'dignity of the person' proved an empty principle.

In the 1990s, the trust bestowed on the Church and its personnel as moral guardians was seriously fractured when it was found to have gravely erred in the area in which it had been most vocal. In addition, rather than show mercy to those whom the Church deemed to be sinners in the sexual realm, it had punished women and their children to an extraordinary degree. In addition, the reputation of church personnel who continue to work for the good of others has been tainted by association. Rather than proactive engagement, explanation or research on these matters, the Church has been concerned with issues such as upgrading the 'sin' of ordaining women, amending canon law, silencing those who try to discuss aspects of Church teaching on gender and sexuality, as well as demanding that all Catholics assent to such dictates without question. The reiteration by Pope Francis that the topic of women in ministry is not up for discussion has reinforced the institutional rejection of the voices, bodies, experiences and contributions of women.[10]

The former status accorded to the Catholic Church has been eroded as a result of the Church's own resistance to confronting and acknowledging its flaws. While many welcome the decline of Catholic Church hegemony and its absolutist ideology, which was supported and upheld by the Irish State, it can also be argued that in its wake there is an absence in the cultural fabric that has yet to be filled. While the 'unbinding' between church and society has taken place in the public forum, the private forum is to a large extent undocumented and unknown. As the Catholic Church has not undertaken, despite everything that has happened in the past thirty-five years, any real examination of itself, its ethos, its structures, and its theology of sexuality in particular, the trajectory of decline is set to continue. Moreover, the failure of the Vatican to recognise that engagement with women is central to the continuation of the faith suggests that the legacy of Irish Catholicism will not be bequeathed to the next generation. It cannot, therefore, be assumed that the 'faith of Catholic Ireland' will be 'forged, sustained, or upheld' into the future by 'the women of Ireland'.

Notes

1 The long-standing belief, derived from Ancient Greek medical conviction, and as understood by two of the most influential church fathers, Augustine and Aquinas, that the uterus was merely a vessel for the man's seed and did not play an active part in the reproduction process, underlies the reasoning behind the disregard for women's physical and mental health in their capacity as bearers of children (Uta Ranke-Heinemann's *Eunuchs For Heaven: The Catholic Church and Sexuality* (1990): 222–3).
2 See, for instance, Nell McCafferty's *A Woman to Blame: The Kerry Babies Case* (1985b), Gene Kerrigan 'The Kerry Babies Case' (1985a), 'The Kerry Babies Case: An Analysis of Mr Justice Lynch's Report' (1985b) and 'We Led the Fight for Family Values' (2015).
3 Nuala Fennell was co-founder of AIM (1972), a family-law reform lobby and of ADAPT (1973), a support group for deserted wives. She also founded Women's Aid (1975), a refuge for battered wives, and was a member of the Council for the Status of Women.
4 For an account of the history of the struggle 'against the suppression of fertility control' in Ireland, see Pauline Conroy's 'Maternity Confined in the Struggle for Fertility Control' (2004).
5 One female guard was involved in the original investigation.
6 The Bishop of Cork, Dr Michael Murphy, and his fellow bishops heartily disapproved, and priests were discouraged from commenting on or engaging with the events, although the extra stimulus for prayer was welcomed. The hallmark of an apparition is a direct personal experience of the divine. Such experiences occur outside of the institutional Church framework and are, therefore, not under the management of church personnel. However, as the role of the Church is as facilitator or conduit for a relationship with the divine, such occurrences can undermine its authority. As a result, the Church eventually appropriates enduring 'holy' sites, such as Lourdes and Knock. See Lawrence J. Taylor's *Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholics* (1995).
7 Other sightings of unusual occurrences were recorded at Ballydesmond and Courtmacsherry in Co. Cork; Mount Melleray in Co. Waterford; Camolin, Glenbrien, and just outside Wexford town, on the Rosslare road, in Co. Wexford; and in Co. Sligo, where four young girls saw an image of Our Lady and what looked like St Bernadette in the sky over a remote field.
8 The commission's report was never made public. Moreover, it is not listed on the Vatican website. It is known about only because it was leaked to the press. See Angela Hanley's *Whose la Carte Menu? Exploring Catholic Themes in Context* (2014).
9 This is a view I heard expressed by female audience members at a number of presentations on the topic of reform in the Catholic Church in 2014 and 2015.
10 At the impromptu press conference held aboard the papal plane in July 2013, Patsy McGarry reports: 'Pope Francis said, 'on the ordination of women, the Church has spoken and said no. Pope John Paul II, in a definitive formulation, said that door is closed' (2013).

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