

Editorial

Clericalism's malign influence

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The crisis surrounding the sexual abuse of children by priests has been used, particularly in the United States, to raise a hue and cry against homosexuality among the clergy. The fault, in other words, was too much tolerance. This illiberal scapegoating has enabled some conservative church leaders to divert attention from deeper structural and cultural problems that led not just to the abuse itself but to the scandal of the many notorious cover-ups by senior church officials. These often left abusers free to continue their abuse and do even more damage to young people. The story of the Dublin Archdiocese, laid bare before Christmas by an Irish government inquiry, is but the latest to dishonour the Church's reputation. The resignation of the bishops concerned is only the beginning of the reckoning.

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, a former papal diplomat, is emerging as one of the few heroes of this sorry affair. He chose Fr Timothy Radcliffe, former Master of the Dominicans, to grasp the real nettle behind the sex-abuse crisis, which is not about homosexuality but about the pervasive culture of clericalism in the Catholic Church. Invited by Archbishop Martin just before Christmas to address the clergy of Dublin Archdiocese, who were still stunned by the disclosures of the inquiry, Fr Radcliffe went straight to the point. Clericalism put priests on pedestals where they were untouchable (and bishops even more so), from which great height they proceeded to load the people with burdens they could not bear - often to do with sexual morality.

"Unlike the Pharisees," he said, "the yoke of Jesus is light. If we think about our beloved Church in recent centuries, we do seem to have been more like Pharisees, laying heavy burdens on the shoulders of the people. Often this has been associated with sexual behavior. We have told families with large numbers of children that no contraception is permitted, and young people who cannot afford to get married that their sexual behavior must be strictly

controlled, and gay people that nothing is permitted - and that they should be ashamed of their sexuality. Regardless of the rights or wrongs of church teaching, this has been experienced by our people as a heavy burden." He added: "You can imagine the anger of a woman who has had child after child and can cope no more, or a young gay person, when they hear what even a few priests have been up to."

The message of his address, the second part of which The Tablet publishes today, is that the crisis must be seen as a moment of fundamental change. The clerical culture that emerged from the reforms of the Council of Trent, he said, stressed rank and power. "This terrible crisis of sexual abuse is deeply linked to the way that power can corrupt human relationships." God will use the crisis by "demolishing our high towers and our clerical pretensions to glory and grandeur so that the Church may be a place in which we may encounter God and each other more intimately". Fr Radcliffe's incisive analysis, while undoubtedly spot on, leaves one disturbing issue unexplored. This Church where power still "corrupts personal relationships" was supposed to have been reformed root and branch by the Second Vatican Council nearly 50 years ago. The challenge now is to ascertain what went wrong.