

'How can any normal priest go through 40 or 50 years and not fall in love?'



Last Sunday, a Catholic congregation actually stood and cheered when their priest Father Sean McKenna announced at the altar that he was stepping down, having embarked on a "loving, beautiful and life-giving relationship".

It could have been the somewhat corny denouement of a romantic comedy, or a scene from Ballykissangel.

The Derry priest, who celebrated his silver jubilee earlier this year, has become involved with a local nurse, Elaine Curran. She is a mother of two children, who reportedly separated from her husband before the relationship with Fr McKenna started.

"I have made my choice," the popular priest declared to his parishioners. "It is a difficult choice but a clear and free one."

At the time of the Eamonn Casey affair 17 years ago, such revelations were greeted with shock and much hand-wringing across the country. But now reports of relationships between priests and a consenting adult woman, married or otherwise, have a certain humdrum quality and are met with a certain relief that there was nothing untoward or illegal going on. There was anger in Derry this week, but much of it was directed at the Church for its archaic strictures on celibacy and the media for delving into what local Catholics saw as a private matter.

Like many other priests, Father Brian D'Arcy greeted the news with a tone of sincere regret, rather than any form of condemnation. It was regret, not because one of his colleagues was involved in a relationship with a woman, but because yet another priest

has been lost to the strict celibacy rule. "We are losing good men," Father D'Arcy told me.

He refers to estimates that 110,000 priests have left the church worldwide because of a similar predicament. Asked whether it was common for priests to fall in love, Father D'Arcy said: "I would think that every priest worth his salt has had to face it at least once in their life. Of course, not all priests will break their vows. They have to make a very difficult choice.

"How can any normal person go through 40 or 50 years in their life and not fall in love? It is something that I have had to face up to myself.

"It is a significant time to think about the value of compulsory celibacy. This may have been suitable for a particular time but that time has now gone. Remember, the first Pope, St Peter, was married."

It is bad enough for the Church that few men in Ireland are called to the priesthood in 2009. Even fewer are called to a life of permanent celibacy, it seems.

Close observers of the Church suggest that the rule is observed in the breach by many priests worldwide.

Richard Sipe, a psychiatrist at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, has estimated that just 10pc of priests are successfully celibate. These fulfilled celibates have embraced their state of being and find it empowering. The psychiatrist says 40pc stick by the rule but only with profound reluctance.

According to a report in The Times, Sipe contends that the remaining 50pc have at some stage during their ministry been sexually active. If these figures are correct, and it should be pointed out that they are US figures, around half of priests find it impossible to practise what they preach.

Father D'Arcy believes celibacy can be a good thing, but it should be voluntary.

"It is an insult to celibacy to make it compulsory. It must be freely chosen in order to make it meaningful. Compulsory celibacy is a man-made rule, introduced to enforce obedience and to ensure that Church property was not dissipated."

The celibacy rule in the Catholic Church was introduced in a piecemeal fashion. One decree in the year 306 declared that priests could not sleep with their wives on the night before Mass (the type of rule that some sports stars would be familiar with).

St Augustine is never likely to become a poster boy for feminists after his famous pronouncement in the 5th century that "nothing is more calculated to cast a man's spirits down from the citadel than the blandishments of a woman".

Increasingly, celibacy was held up as an ideal, but for another 1,000 years at least it was still common for men of the cloth to be married.

In the more recent past, Irish priests who became involved in love affairs either covered up their romances, in some cases taking their secrets to the grave, or simply left the Church for a new life, frequently abroad.

Increasingly, Irish Catholic priests with an inclination to marry are continuing their spiritual journey elsewhere. Father D'Arcy believes up to six former Catholic priests have married and joined the Church of Ireland in recent years.

The ease of this transition has been demonstrated by Dermot Dunne, a former Catholic priest who married, became a Church of Ireland clergyman, and now holds a senior position as Dean of Christ Church Cathedral.

It only took the priest three years to make the leap from Roman Catholic priesthood to a post in the Anglican Church.

Explaining his decision, he said: "What was emerging for me is that we are not called to be 'other worldly' but actually to live fully in this world and to value humanity and the world that God has created.

"The decisive moment for me was to admit that God is mediated through our acceptance of an inclusive humanity where there can be no exclusions.

"This inclusive humanity embraces the fullness and beauty of human sexuality from one end of its continuum to the other and the full participation of the woman as well as the man in the celebration of the life of faith."

A growing number of Catholics, both clergy and parishioners, are copying the example of Dr Dunne by simply voting with their feet. "If a priest leaves the Catholic Church and joins the Church of Ireland, there is no longer a sense of betrayal among parishioners," says Canon Ian Ellis, editor of The Church of Ireland Gazette. "In some ways, the two churches are coming closer together. So that makes the transition easier."

What rankles with Catholic campaigners for the abolition of compulsory celibacy is the apparently inconsistent line taken by the Vatican. Father Brian D'Arcy points out that married Anglican priests are admitted to the Catholic Church.

He said such priests were "re-ordained" in the Catholic Church and allowed to minister at parish level without celibacy being imposed.

Quirks of history also enable certain priests with links to the Orthodox Church to get married with the blessing of the Vatican.

The warm reaction of parishioners to Father McKenna's plight again demonstrates the gulf between many ordinary Catholics and the Papacy over certain teachings.

So long as the present Pontiff is alive, it is a gulf that is likely to remain unbridged.

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