A Changing Church: Radical perspectives of Catholicism from the margins of society in Dublin

Caitlin Connelly
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A Changing Church:

Radical perspectives of Catholicism from the margins of society in Dublin

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SIT Ireland, Fall 2004

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Introduction

Spirituality and religion, particularly Catholicism, have truly shaped this country. From mountains to wells, Churches to shopping centers, the mark of the Catholic Church is everywhere. As the last few months have progressed, I have realized that my journey through Ireland has also been shaped by the interactions I have had with religion and the Catholic Church.

My stay in Ireland has reignited an internal conflict that has been churning for a long time about my own spiritual life, particularly my Catholic upbringing. From a young age I thought I had no use for Catholicism — I found it to be old-fashioned and archaic and hypocritical. So at the first opportunity I had (after my confirmation), I made the switch from “Catholic” to “former Catholic” or “raised Catholic” — I stopped going to Mass, stopped saying my evening prayers, and distanced myself from the religion as much as I could. But part of me wanted the tradition, the community and the identity that the religion provided.

For some reason these last few months in Ireland have made me feel “more Catholic.” I have surprised myself by doing things I never would do back home: agreeing when an old woman says of me, “Of course she’s Catholic, I can tell by the look of her;” feeling defensive when someone makes an innocent comment about “idolatry” in the Church; and inserting “As a Catholic …” whenever it is even remotely relevant. Ironically, the part of me that I normally feel most distant and alien from, my Catholic upbringing, is precisely the thing that has given me a sense of comfort — a feeling of “Ah, yes, I understand this,” — among these wholly unfamiliar surroundings.
For my project, I wanted to make an effort to understand better the religion I was raised with. Particularly since the recent death of my grandmother, who was devoutly Catholic, I have wanted to engage in a re-appraisal of what the Church has to offer. Through the various experiences I have had here, I have been surprised to learn that there is a depth and diversity in the Catholic Church that I had never taken the time to investigate.

One of my guiding beliefs is that conflict is, all at once, a signal, a resource and an opportunity: it signifies that something is out of balance, it fuels us to act and gives us a chance to do so. And so, I have taken the opportunity to explore this sense of inner conflict, because it is not unique to me — it is something that is occurring within many Irish Catholics, and also it is reflected in society as a whole. My motivation was quite selfish — I wanted to challenge myself spiritually by confronting and exploring my own relationship with Catholicism. I wanted to do this by meeting and talking with interesting people who could provide unique perspectives on the Church. I also wanted to put myself in places that sustained that sense of tension and conflict within me. Early on, I realized that I would leave it to someone with more time and resources to paint a grand, perfect masterpiece of Dublin’s religious landscape. So rather than try to end up with a comprehensive, definitive statement on the nature of the Catholicism in Dublin, I set out to find those people, places and works that add complexity and nuance to the picture.

In this study, I have explored Irish Catholicism in Dublin, and the relationship and tension between the margins and the center. In particular, I have examined the ways that people on the margins of the Church and on the margins of society in Dublin are responding to the changes in the Church. By incorporating their experiences and views
into our understanding of Catholicism, we can gain a more accurate and multifaceted understanding of “what’s going on” with the Catholic Church in this city, and where its future lies.

Methodology

There were two (sometimes conflicting) influences that shaped my methodology. One was my journalistic background — my only experience with field research methods, like systematic observation and interviewing, was in the context of writing articles for journalism classes or my college newspaper. This affected my interviewing style in both positive and negative ways — it was good to have the experience and know what kinds of questions could elicit the best answers, but it was also bad because I found myself looking for “soundbites” and quotable answers. My methodology was also influenced by my desire to let my project evolve as an organic process. Many of my decisions were based on instinct rather than a more systematic process. When I began my field research, I went where I found that my interest was piqued, and where I saw potential for personal growth.

At first I was relieved to have a topic that is so expansive and extensively talked about. However, I realized that can also be a problem — it is challenging to figure out how and where to start. I did a great deal of observation, especially during the first couple days of the project period, and tried to keep my eyes and ears open at all times. I decided to orient myself by walking around parts of the city and taking note of any physical evidence that I came across regarding the Church — imagery, conversations among
people, buildings and place names. I also took photographs of some of the most
interesting images I came across (See Appendix). This gave me an initial picture of the
role of the Church in Dublin, and an idea of just how pervasive its influence is. The
nature of my topic made this a unique and useful way to “jump in.”

I also engaged in some participant observation: attending Mass, meetings, and
other cultural events that had relevance to my topic. Immersion was a goal in the
beginning, but it ended up not occurring to the extent that I had envisioned. This was
partially because it became frustrating and I did not really feel like I was gaining much
from some of those experiences — as one woman said to me, “You see one Mass, you’ve
seen them all.” That’s not entirely true, but I will admit that it did feel that way at certain
points. I attended a number of meetings and events with the Catholic Worker group, both
for my research and for my own interest. I was wary of attending too many events for two
reasons: I did not want to become “burned out” and lose interest. I also did not want to
end up with too much material that ended up being useless. Rather than attend everything
and anything dealing with the Church, I stuck to events that held my interest and lent me
important insights — both personally and for the project.

Spontaneous and informal conversations were helpful guides. Exchanges with my
host family and with random people I met in the city kept me grounded and kept my
theorizing instinct in check.

Academic research was necessary, of course. Two books were my main sources:
“Moral Monopoly” by Tom Inglis, and “Irish Catholicism since 1950,” by Louise Fuller.
In “Moral Monopoly” Inglis argues that the rise and fall of the Catholic Church’s power
is best understood in terms of its influence over the Irish population’s conceptions of
morality. It gave useful theoretical frameworks and helped me understand just how strongly the Church guided people’s behavior — and how much that has changed. Fuller’s book gives a very detailed account of the Church and its role in society from the 1950s through the 1970s. It epilogue covers the decades since the seventies, in slightly less detail, but it explains them well enough to give a good body of background knowledge. Both books were from a critical, liberal academic perspective, but Inglis seemed slightly less nostalgic and sympathetic for the Church than Fuller. I found them both very useful. I also used sections of Ivana Bacik’s “Kicking and Screaming” as a reference for facts about the social changes that have taken place.

Reading newspapers like the Irish Times helped me gain an understanding of the way the media shape the dialogue, and to stay up to date with current issues surrounding the Church. I also read Church publications, like The Irish Catholic and newsletters I picked up from churches, to learn more about how the leaders and people of the Church view and portray themselves. I wanted the field work to shape the theoretical frameworks, rather than approach the field work with too many preconceived ideas about the way things are that I found in books. While I did enough academic research to give me a solid background understanding of the situation, I did not let that dominate my project. I wanted my paper to be well-grounded, down to earth, and respectful of the perspectives of the real people I learned from, and I think my approach allowed it to be so.

Informal interviews were an important part of my research. It was difficult to decide who to speak with, but I decided to think about where one might find activity and life within Catholicism. I must admit, though, that I did not always find the kind of life
and activity I expected, once I spoke to people. My first two interviews were with people we had met with in class. In many ways, one interview would lead to the next — I would hear a name or an organization, then find out more about it by looking on the internet, visiting a place, or making a phone call. I did not record my interviews, I took extensive notes and reflected on the interviews as soon as I could after they were finished. I found my memory to be quite reliable. I do not think that a transcript of my interviews would have added much to my paper, but there were, however, some interviews I wish I had recorded just to have them for myself.

Here is a list of my major sources, in the order in which met them:

Ciaron O’Reilly, Dublin Catholic Worker — Ciaron is a 43 years old native Australian whose father is Irish. A pacifist and anti-war activist, Ciaron is awaiting trial along with five others who participated in the vandalizing and disabling of an American bomber jet, stopping over on the way to Iraq, in Shannon Airport in February 2003. He and his housemates work at a soup kitchen and hold liturgy meetings on Sunday evenings. I attended two Sunday night liturgies, had a visit to the house, and participated in a vigil/protest held outside the U.S. Embassy in solidarity with the protest against the School of Americas held each year in Ft. Benning, Georgia.

Terry Fagan, North Inner City Folklore Commission — Terry was born and raised in the North City Center in Dublin. He works as a community activist, particularly in trying to rid the area of drugs, and helping those who suffered abuse in Catholic-run residential schools in the early decades of the twentieth century. He is also local historian
who collects stories and published people’s accounts of life in the inner city in the past century. On two occasions, I spent a couple hours walking around the north city center with him, listening to his stories and meeting people.

Fr. Kieran Dunne, Trinity College Chaplain — Fr. Kieran has been a Roman Catholic Chaplain at Trinity College for about a year and a half, and he previously worked as a secondary school teacher. He considers himself to be working “on the margins,” because although he is part of the Dublin diocese, his work varies greatly from that of a parish priest. He performs church services at the college, organizes programs for the Trinity College campus community, and helps provide spiritual guidance to those who seek him out.

Fr. Peter McVerry — Fr. Peter McVerry is a Jesuit priest located in the north city center. He founded Arrupe, a hostel for homeless boys about thirty years ago. He frequently speaks out on issues like homelessness and social justice.

Gemma McKenna — Gemma is a former nun who worked as a missionary in Kenya for 18 years. When she returned to Ireland, she encountered a Church that she believed wouldn’t allow her help the community in the ways she thought best, and so she left the sisterhood. She now lives in the Rialto Mansions, a poor estate of housing flats, most of which have been vacated or demolished. She works with an adult faith education group called Partners in Faith.
Fr. Adrian, Prior, Saint Saviour Dominican Church — Fr. Adrian is the prior at the Dominican church on Lower Dominic Street. The brothers run the parish church, which is one of the many inner city churches that has few parishioners still attending Mass.

These people all are working on the fringes (or totally outside) of the official Church structure, on the margins of society. Regrettably, I realize that I only have one female voice represented, but the other meeting I had planned to have with a woman fell through. There are a number of women active within the Church doing valuable and remarkable work in the Dublin area, and, looking back, I wish I had made more of an effort to meet them. This does, however, represent the nature of the dialogue within the Church — there are many women active as nuns, but only men can be priests, and so woman have largely been excluded from participating as fully as men in the “official” Church.

The organization of this paper has been particularly difficult. It relies heavily on the accounts of the interviewees, which I had planned to do from the outset. I will first give an historical overview of the background situation, starting with the early twentieth century, using my academic sources. Then I will present my field research, by describing my observations and interviews, grouped by the ways in which they add to our understanding of the Church’s past, present and future.
By the 1960s, during the time that most would describe as the height of the Catholic Church’s power and influence in Ireland, the small tin church on Sean McDermott Street in Dublin was bursting at the seams. It was built in the 1920s around the corner from St. Mary’s Pro-Cathedral, which was overflowing with parishioners. So, in 1961, Our Lady of Lourdes, a large permanent structure with brick walls and stained-glass windows, was built in its place. Another forty years have passed, but today the story is very different: rather than being too full, the Our Lady of Lourdes is empty. The church is often closed, and Mass is sometimes held in the small convent down the street because it is too expensive to heat and maintain the church for the few who show up. But this is not just the story of one neighborhood — it is just one part of the story of a nation’s changing relationship with the Catholic Church.

Most agree that the Catholic Church in Ireland was so dominant for so long because, since its founding, it had a great deal of influence over both the government and the people of the country. Louise Fuller states that “The Irish Catholic Church had survived through the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the face of well-nigh overwhelming odds — plantation, the discrimination of the Penal Laws, persecution — and had emerged victorious. Against this background, by the end of the nineteenth century, a symbiosis of Catholic and Irish had taken shape which was to have enormous political consequences.”¹ So when independence was achieved in 1921, it was a victory not only for the Irish but for Catholicism as well. In 1935, at a St. Patrick’s Day celebration, Eamon DeValera said, “Since the coming of St. Patrick, 1500 years ago,

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Ireland has been a Christian and a Catholic nation. All the ruthless attempts made through the centuries to force her from this allegiance have not shaken her faith. She remains a Catholic nation.”

This was cemented by the writing of 1937 Irish Constitution, for which Eamon DeValera had consulted with Archbishop John Charles McQuaid. To this day its preamble states that “In the name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions of both men and States must be referred, we, the People of Eire. Humbly acknowledging all our obligations to our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ, who sustained our fathers though centuries…” As originally written, it also recognized the “special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the faith professed by a great majority of the citizens.”

Tom Inglis argues that through its close ties with the state, the Church had a particular influence over the population in the realm of morality. The hospitals and schools were generally run and owned by the Church. He provides a long list of legislation that had been formulated with direct input from the bishops in the first few decades of Ireland’s independence, which included the following: Censorship of Films Act, 1923; Censorship of Publications Act, 1929; Vocational Education Act, 1930; Constitution of Ireland, 1937; Public Health Bill, 1945; Health Act, 1947; Intoxicating Liquor (Amendment) 1948; Adoption Act, 1952; Vital Statistics and Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages Act, 1952; Health Act, 1953; Intoxicating Liquor Act, 1960; Charities Act, 1961; Adoption Act 1964; Succession Act, 1965. He says, “It is obvious from this list that any direct input from the bishops in terms of law creation was

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2 Fuller 5.
confined to moral conduct in general, and family, education and health in particular.”

The Church did not only exercise its moral authority through the government — the Church itself was strong and its structure is hierarchical, and decrees and statements handed down from the Church authorities were often adhered to as though they were law.

The Church’s institutional strength was supported by the great deal of popular loyalty to the Church. It is difficult to quantify religiosity in a meaningful way, but it is clear that at its height Catholicism guided both the beliefs and the practices of most of the people of Ireland. By 1961, 95 percent of the people in the Republic of Ireland identified as Catholic and although there is no comprehensive survey or report of religious activities of these times, individual accounts and smaller studies consistently state that adherence to the rules of the Church was remarkably high and weekly attendance at Mass was often upwards of 95 percent of Catholics.

People exhibited a strong devotion to the Church and its teachings. In the first half of the 20th century the vast majority of Catholics attended Mass at least weekly, received sacraments, and went to confession. Fuller states that “As well as the Mass, what was noteworthy at the time was the wide variety of other devotional forms engaged in by the laity. Among them were confraternities, sodalities, parish missions, pilgrimages, processions, cults of devotion to saints, benediction, the Forty Hours Novena, Marian devotions, the rosary, devotions to the Sacred Heart, devotions to the Miraculous Medal, the Stations of the Cross and the Nine First Fridays.”

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4 Fuller, 19.
5 Fuller, 21.
The changes began in the 1960s. From that point on, nearly all the factors that allowed the Church to grow so powerful were in the process of reversing. The Irish economy has steadily improved since the 1960s. In first half of the twentieth century, Ireland was relatively isolated, but facilitated by global media and interconnectedness within the European Union, Irish society has increasingly become more outward-looking and linked with other countries. The 1960s also saw the meeting of the Second Vatican Council, which, in keeping with the general mood of the 1960s, led to a more liberal, open Church, with an emphasis on ecumenism, Scripture, and accessibility. After this point, it became more acceptable for people to question the Church and, as Fuller suggests, have a more questioning and dialogical relationship with the Church than they had in the past. As the economy has modernized, so has the government, and this has meant a greater separation of Church and state. In 1972, a referendum was passed which amended the constitution to remove the Catholic Church’s “special position” clause.

In the 1990s, the rate of change increased exponentially. These were the years of the Celtic Tiger, the seemingly unstoppable explosion of economic growth whose implications were (and still are) enormous. The economic changes led to even greater integration and connectedness with other countries. The transformation of the Church in Ireland sped up as well, partially because of all the scandals that came to light in those years. The first was in 1992, the news broke that Bishop Casey of Galway had had an affair with an American woman and she had born his child, all of which he had tried to cover up. Then came the outpouring of sexual abuse scandals and allegations of pedophilia in residential schools run by priests and Christian Brothers, which is still a major issue today. It became clear that these had all been covered up by the Church, and
after that point, many people lost their loyalty to the Church. Laws regarding
relationships and sexual morality that went against Church teaching were passed in the
1990s, as clear signs that the Church no longer had a lock on law and morality in the
country: contraception was made legal in 1992, homosexual acts were decriminalized in
1995, and divorce was legalized in 1995. Schools and hospitals are still largely owned by
the Church, but they operate much more independently than they used to, largely because
there are not enough people in religious vocations to fill the positions.

Inglis argues that the Church has lost some of its power because people have
developed a new sense of ethics. He says Irish religiosity has always incorporated a mix
of three types of ethical behavior — magical-devotional, legalistic-orthodox, and
individually principled, and that over the last few decades, Ireland has seen a shift from
legalistic-orthodox behavior, to a more individually-principled type. He says that “Until
the first half of the nineteenth century, unorthodox religious practices, many of which
were magical, appear to have been the dominant type of religious behavior in Ireland.
Throughout the next one hundred years a legalistic adherence to the rules and the
regulations of the Catholic Church became the dominant type. Since the end of the 1960s,
religious legalism has begun to be replaced by individually principled ethics about what
is morally right and wrong.” 6 This shift can be partially linked to the economic changes
that have occurred. In a survey taken in the mid-1970s, when the shifts were beginning,
respondents who exhibited an ethics based on moral principles found outside the Church
were largely those who were more educated and lived in urban areas: six out of ten with
third-level education or beyond expressed disagreement with some aspect of the Church,

6 Inglis 22.
only two out of ten with a primary-level education did so.\textsuperscript{7} Amidst this backdrop, Ireland has become increasingly secularized, particularly in urban areas, where the socioeconomic changes are more evident.

Seeing the sacred

So how does one start to try and understand the dynamic that exists today? I started by walking and looking around. There is a great deal of physical evidence of the complicated nature of the status of the Church in Dublin. A careful look around the city center\textsuperscript{8}, reveals various images and visual metaphors that make it clear that there is nothing simple and straightforward about the role of Catholicism in the city.

The first thing one might notice is that, unlike many other cities, the Catholic churches, at least the older ones, are mostly tucked away on side streets, rather than out in plain sight on the main thoroughfares. At first that may seem strange, because Ireland is known as such a strongly Catholic country. However, the placement of the churches makes sense upon consideration of the country’s history — for a long time under British rule the expression of Catholicism was banned. During that period, it was illegal for Catholic churches to be built on the main streets. So, rather than being positioned at the top of a main road like O’Connell Street, the Pro-Cathedral is instead located on an adjacent street. Rather than displaying the gothic spires typical of Catholic cathedrals, it reflects its Roman influence and the façade is dominated by huge columns. It looked more like an official building, like a courthouse, than a church.

\textsuperscript{7} Inglis 37.
\textsuperscript{8} Most of these observations were made in the north city center.
But, just because the major churches are located out of the way, there are a number of other visual reminders of people’s Catholic faith, particularly on the north side of the city center. Just north and east from the Pro-Cathedral sits Our Lady of Lourdes church on Sean McDermott Street. Enshrined there are the remains of Matt Talbot, the drunk who, inspired by God, gave up drinking and spent the rest of his life prostrating himself by wearing chains. He is seen by many as a sort of inner-city hero — there is currently a campaign to have him canonized, and across the street from the church is a shop called the Matt Talbot.

A few streets away, in a little green park that is now in the shadows of tall block flats being constructed, there is a small grotto with a statue of Our Lady and a bench where people can kneel and pray. These statues are common sights in disadvantaged inner-city areas. There is an Our Lady statue in the green between the Lower Dominic Street flats, that is housed in a white encasement. She stands still, encased in her dirty, smudged, translucent little house, stories below the din in the flats above her. There is another just off Rialto Street near the Fatima Mansions blocks of flats. A statue of Jesus Christ with outstretched arms is encased and set on a bright red pedestal in the middle of O’Connell Street by the taxi queue. It was erected by the taxi drivers’ association in Dublin.

In the ILAC shopping center, there is a chapel nestled behind the stairs that lead to the library. There are usually a few elderly ladies about the place. It is a small dark room, with heavy fabric draped on the walls and four or five pews on either side of a little aisle leading up to the crucifix, the red lantern suspended from a gold chain attached to the ceiling, and the flower arrangement. To a stranger, this odd placement of a place of
worship may seem to evoke a strange tension between the sacred and the profane. It is also a striking visual metaphor — almost as if it represents the Church as the conscience lurking in the corner of a society plagued by rampant commercialism. It is there, as one option among hundreds that are much more attractive, like McDonalds offering fruit as an alternative to greasy French fries. Clearly, few people looking for healthy options would go to McDonalds. Likewise, few people go to a shopping center in search of spiritual fulfillment. Or do they?

There is a church, formerly known as the “Black church,” on Mountjoy Rd. It has been gutted and converted into a corporate office building. There are a number of spires stretching upward from the rooftop, and all have clearly have had their tops — crosses, probably — removed. Even the main steeple stops bluntly. It was a very clear illustration of secularization, and of the church being overtaken by the new forces that have emerged as powerful in society, namely, the economy and all the change it has brought with it.

In the official story, Ireland was strongly, devoutly Catholic, the sixties came, society became more savvy and liberal, the Church could not cope, and then came the scandals, which sealed the deal. With this understanding, I assumed that suburban churches (whose parishioners would be well-educated and wealthier) would be suffering, while inner-city parishes (where poorer, less-educated people lived) would be thriving.

But a couple of observations I made were contrary to that assumption, and they led me to believe that the official story is incomplete. One is that St. Mary’s church in Rathfarnham, an affluent suburb of Dublin, holds multiple Masses on Sundays, and regularly fills up with people. The other is that Our Lady of Lourdes, and a number of other inner-city churches in poor areas often stand empty.
The missing piece can be found by venturing out to the margins and speaking to people, both within and outside of the Church. The radical critiques expressed by my interviewees yield a vastly different interpretation of the Catholic Church’s role in Dublin.

Rereading the past

The people I spoke to had different ways of interpreting the Catholic Church’s past, and the changes it has undergone. Traditional descriptions would emphasize the strength of the Church, and how deeply Catholicism was embedded into people’s lives. The Church is described at being at its height in the first half of the twentieth century — when it enjoyed the highest attendance rates at Mass and when it had the most institutional power. However, many of the people I spoke to would measure the strength of Catholicism in a different way: how well the Church was living out God’s message. When adopting that stance, they would argue that the Church was not as strong as many people thought it was.

Fr. Peter McVerry said, “It was always built on very shaky soil. It flourished at a time when authority was more respected, people were less educated, and things were changing more slowly.” He said that the concept of accepting authority for authority’s sake has vanished. “It had no chance of surviving,” he said. He also added that its influence was limited. “I think that the Church in Ireland made a deal with the state … that the Church would dominate the moral climate in two areas — sexuality and education. In return the Church stood back from exercising moral mandate in areas like
social justice. … The Church’s influence was limited — it had nothing to say about wealth and taxation and a whole range of other issues.”

Fr. Kieran Dunne pointed out that the Church was only powerful because it was based on a great deal of subservience and deference on the part of the laity. He said that people imagine that the Church was more powerful than it actually was.

My meeting with Terry Fagan gave me some important insights into the shift that has occurred with people living in the inner-city. He knows the north inner city and its inhabitants as intimately as many people know their own homes and families. The picture he paints of his community is great devotion to the Church that was repeatedly taken advantage of by the clergy and hierarchy, until people finally turned away from the Church.

“The church is the center point in any community, religion is a mainstay,” he said. But, as he pointed to an old building that used to be a convent, he said, “The Church is disappearing from the communities.” When he was young, life revolved around the Catholic Church in many ways, and people exhibited a great deal of devotion to their religion, despite their own personal hardships. “Growing up, there’d be holy pictures all over the walls. There might not be a crust of bread to eat, but we had all the pictures.” When it came time for religious holidays or festivals, the whole neighborhood would be covered in banners and people would have religious statues in their windows. He said religion kept people alive through “all the torment and the sickness.” “It was the greatest thing that could happen to you,” Terry said, “to see someone come up to you at the end of the day and tell you they’re praying for you.”
As hard as the Church tried to save people’s souls in his community, he said, they did not much to feed them. Kids would often go to school hungry, he said, having eaten no more than a piece of bread and a cup of tea. They would be so hungry that when the teachers had them practice for first communion with broken bits of biscuits, the boys would purposefully mess up over and over again, just to fill their stomachs. He pointed out the alleyway to the church where the children would run after school, and where the priest would be waiting with arms outstretched, to catch them and herd them into the church for prayers before going home.

Physical abuse, though it was not called that back then, was routine. Because of the abuse they received from the teachers, many boys would skip out of school when it came time for religion class, and they would go hang out by the docks. He pointed out the very spot where kids would hang out when they would sneak out of their religion classes, to avoid having “the shit beat out of you” after answering a question wrong. However, being caught skipping school had dangerous consequences, as well. Terry told me that many students who were caught skipping class would be put in front of a judge and sent away to the industrial schools, where they would be subject to even more serious abuse.

Two men came up to us, separately, as Terry and I walked around the streets. They were talking about court cases and evidence, but I had a hard time following the conversations. Both appeared to be destitute and in rough shape — dirty, rumpled clothes, missing teeth, etc. After talking to them, Terry told me that he was helping them pursue legal action for the way they were treated in residential schools when they were younger. Physical and sexual abuse was severe, and he recounted to me several cases of abuse and rape that were particularly brutal and had occurred to people close to him.
“How could a priest rape a child and then perform Mass?” he exclaimed. “How could they call themselves a Christian? How could they call themselves a human being? It’s mad.” He stopped walking. “The Church never asked for forgiveness or admitted its mistakes.” Terry put his hands out. “Until the Church comes out and puts its hands up and says yes, we did it,” he said, nothing will change.

We stopped in a building where he works on some of his projects, and had a cup of tea with another man who worked there, named Redmond, whom Terry affectionately introduced as an atheist. The two of them spent a long time trading stories about the various tools used by teachers and priests to torture students, and while the two of them were good-natured about it, they clearly harbored a great deal of resentment and anger.

Everyone decries the abuse that took place, but it was clear that Terry and many people in north inner city community do not have the luxury of being critical from such a safe and comfortable distance — instead they have to cope with the memories of it all and the scars it left on their communities. At the industrial schools, the children were supposed to learn a trade, but often learned instead how to become a better criminal.

“Most of the biggest criminals went through the industrial schools,” he said. Many were also severely abused. Once they got out, many turned to drink, drugs and crime to cope. Terry considers himself lucky that his experiences were milder than many others’. He said “The way I cope with it is to get as many people as I can to tell their stories and to sue the state and sue the Church. …The Church and the state destroyed thousands of children.”

Terry also told me that many people in his community were let down in 1979, when the Pope visited Ireland. They were told that he would stop in at Our Lady of
Lourdes, where the Matt Talbot’s shrine is. He said that he and a priest were able to
round up people in the community, including “hard criminals,” to clean and spruce up the
Church. But when the motorcade came through that day, it drove by and kept going.
Terry said that was like the last straw for many people in his community, and that many
people were truly let down.

For all these reasons, Terry said, people do not attend Mass the way they used to.
“I’m not religious, but I still have my faith in God. I go into the church and I pray, but I
don’t go to Mass. I don’t look up to the priests the way I used to.” He said that is the case
for most of the people he knows, and the only ones who attend Mass or go into the
church regularly are a small bunch of elderly people. “People didn’t turn against God,” he
said, “they turned against the appointees of the Church and the things they did. People
still have their faith. It’s sad, in a way, but people are hearing the stories and the trust is
all gone.”

I met with him again the next day, and he had a similar message. Many priests
just want to bury all the scandals, but “you can’t bury something like that,” he said.
“People still have their faith, they still have their religion. But Mass doesn’t mean
anything to them anymore.” He somewhat wistfully said that now there is a whole
generation that has grown up without the Church because many people turned away from
it 20 years ago or so. Sometimes, he said, “people do go back looking for their faith”—
they will go into the churches and light candles, or pray by themselves. But, he said,
nothing will change unless the clergy “come in tune with the people, come clean with
what happened, and say they want a new beginning.”
“The attitude of some priests is changing,” Terry said. “But I don’t know if it’s a bit too late.”

Living in the present

All the interviewees, even the priests, do their work outside of the more formal confines of the parish church or the Dublin diocese. Because of the variety of their locations and experiences, they all have different “causes” that they work for, but they have similarly radical views about the Church’s current state. Most agreed that the Church now holds little relevance for the lives of the poor, and that is because the Church structures and rules eventually became so far removed from what its primary role should be, as a source of community and aid for the poorer sections of society.

Gemma McKenna works with an organization called Partners in Faith, which is essentially a series of spiritual development workshops for adults. In the sessions, they encourage people to reconsider their faith, from a more critical perspective. They cover topics like how God/Mystery reveals itself, images of God, sources of images and notions about God, what people think “God’s dream” is for them, and prophecy. They are not affiliated with the Catholic Church, but the sessions are informed by a Catholic ethos.

Gemma lives and works with people who are severely economically disadvantaged. Whoever named the Fatima Mansions had a biting sense of irony, because the dismal blocks of corporation housing where she lives are anything but mansions. The west end of the area used to have more buildings, but now it is a wide expanse of dirt,
concrete and heavy building machinery. The flats to the east are all vacant and boarded up, awaiting demolition. Gemma lives in one of the four buildings surrounding a square concrete where there is a rickety-looking playground. Her flat is a warm, colorful sanctuary, in the midst of the depressing surroundings, and the kids living there seem to think so as well — during our meeting, we were interrupted several times by children who wanted her to come out and play. Ever since the Luas line was built nearby, there has been a running joke among the residents: the Celtic Tiger rode the Luas to the Fatima Mansions, took one look at the area, and then hopped back on the train to get back into the city.

Gemma said that for people living in places like this, the Catholic Church has become irrelevant. She said she still attends Mass, but she is an anomaly in that respect. She said, “I go but I find it very difficult. None of the priests come over here, ever, even when they’re invited. … They have no sense of the life of the people here. … Reluctantly, I go to Mass.” She also said of her neighbors, “It doesn’t make any sense to do the religious thing themselves. They go past the church to the pub, literally. In the sermons, your reality is never included. The public way of doing that doesn’t have any relevance to them.” Gemma believes the Church is not relevant because its structure stayed the same for such a long time. “Why should we go and listen to one man talk about the gospel for ten minutes?” She said that the sex scandals reinforced the drift of the people away from the Church.

Fr. Peter McVerry has dedicated the last 30 years of his life to working with poor people. Although he is an outspoken critic of the Church, he said his relations with
the Church are generally good. He thinks the Church is appreciative of his work and that it and is “glad I’m doing it and not them.”

“Justice should be at the center of the Church’s agenda,” he said. “The Church should be screaming loudly from the rooftops” about issues like justice, drug abuse and homelessness, and it ought to be working with people on the margins. “If the Church was doing that, Churches in poor areas would be packed.” Rather, the Churches in wealthier areas are packed and it is the poorer areas where the Churches are empty. He said this is because “middle class people can go on comfortably living lives that aren’t touched by the poor. The Church supports them in that and allows them to do that.”

Fr. Peter said Catholicism still has a substantial role in the lives of many people and influences their lives. “But, he said, “it has become increasingly irrelevant to many people’s lives and is virtually totally irrelevant to the lives of the poor.” He said that its only relevance for poorer people would be as a provider of services much like a doctor or lawyer, vending first communions, marriages and burials.

Fr. Kieran, as a former secondary school teacher, he said he was used to having a captive audience. But at Trinity College, the audience just is not there, even though he believes that the majority of the students there are at least “culturally Catholic.” (The university does not survey students regarding their religious affiliations, so there are no official numbers available.) Many people drop away from the Church after making their confirmation, in their teens, and so their knowledge of the Scriptures only extends to a basic level, and therefore they find themselves unable to use their religion as a guide in their adult lives. He said that the Church is certainly at a crisis point, but not in a negative way — he prefers to use it in the sense of the original Greek meaning, which is
“crossroads.” He said the Church is at a point where it has a “wonderful opportunity to
reform, rediscover our roots. … The Church is a graced by the savior as it ever was.”

The changes have also been welcomed by Fr. Adrian, Dominican prior at St.
Saviour’s. The Church used to be busy and active, but the surrounding community has
changed drastically in the last few decades, especially when public housing flats were
built near the Church. Whereas families used to live in the neighborhood for generations,
development has turned it into a more fragmented place, where people come and go.
There is also more ethnic diversity in the area than there ever has been before, which
poses challenges to maintaining a church community. He said, “People feel less of a need
for God and the church. … On the positive side, a lot of the changes are good. There’s
more of a passion for justice and equality.” He said that there is a great deal of
uncertainty among clergy, because so much has changed so quickly. “The Church has
become humbled. That’s no harm — I think we’ve become stronger.” He finds
reassurance in his faith. “When you look at the history of humankind, we’re at a small,
tiny moment. You don’t give up because of that. … You rarely hear people debate about
the message — we don’t talk about God, we talk about the Church. The Church is a small
part of it. … Jesus’ message is so simple — to love one another. We complicate it.”

Envisioning the future

Although there is a great deal of uncertainty about where the future of the Church
lies, those with a more radical view on the Church believe that the shift that is occurring
will allow the Church to rediscover its roots. They believe the Church’s power as an
institution should be diminished, so there is room for the message of the religion to take center stage. Most agreed that this would take place by re-emphasizing the Scriptures, and then following the example of Jesus by serving others.

Fr. Peter McVerry expressed similar hopes the materialization of a small Church that is committed to “standing up for the poor, being the voice of the poor, and promoting the values of dignity for every human being. It would be a small minority of committed people.” The fact that so few are entering the priesthood will speed up what he sees as the most important change that must take place: “The Irish Church has been very clerically dominated. Lay people have got to take back control of the Church. That would be extremely healthy for the Church. That’s probably the key reform that’s needed.” He said that the laity needs to question and decide what the Church is about, which he says, is about being with and taking care of those in society who need it most. “If the Church lives that, then it would be like Jesus itself — very unpopular. I am uncomfortable when I see the Church being popular, especially in a country where the vast majority are comfortable. … I think the Church is making the comfortable more comfortable.”

Gemma McKenna said that trying to bring in reforms to the current Church structure, like allowing women to be priests, skirt the larger issue. She said she would empathize with women who want to be ordained, but, she said, it would not be helpful to have “a crowd of women doing the same things men are doing.” Rather, she would prefer to see the Church continue to diminish in size. “I think it has to fall apart before it can come back to something living, and I hope it does.” People are trying to patch things up, she said, but that won’t work. “When the wall falls people will have room to develop. Our role is subversion in the best sense of the word.”
Nearly everyone I spoke to emphasized the need to re-focus on Scripture. Fr. Adrian said that the Church has never encouraged people to read the Bible, and that the Bible will prove to be one of the ways forward. The Dominicans’ motto is “veritas” — truth. And so Fr. Adrian said that reading the Scriptures and questioning them is the only way to get closer to truth. “Faith and prayer must be based in the Bible,” he said. “The Scripture wasn’t emphasized years ago, and that’s a pity.” By returning to its roots in Scripture, he said, “The Church will rediscover itself in service.” He said for his parish, it will be especially important to reach out to immigrants — not to convert them, but to help them and welcome them, as a church community. He said, “That’s what Church is about; it’s about bringing people together. We’re all brothers and sisters.”

I met up with Ciaron O’Reilly and others from the Dublin Catholic Worker on several occasions. The first was at one of their Sunday evening liturgy meetings. The Sunday evening liturgies are small and they entail a radical reading of the gospels, in which they interpret Jesus’ teachings and actions as challenges to power structures (both in the government and the Church) and actions of empowerment to and justice for the poor. A small group gathered at the house for a Scripture reading, and then discussion. That evening was focused on remembering the Jesuit priests murdered in El Salvador in the 1980s, by graduates of the former School of the Americas, a brutal military training program that has trained Latin American militias in the United States. Then we shared bread and wine, and then had dinner and more discussion. I also went back the next morning to speak with Ciaron. The following Saturday I attended a vigil and demonstration they held outside the United States embassy in memory of those killed by graduates of the SOA, in solidarity with those attending the annual protest at Ft. Benning,
Georgia. I attended the next night’s liturgy as well. That evening’s gospel reading was about John the Baptist and Jesus, both of whom worked on the margins, outside of the traditional structures of power. That evening I realized how closely the mission of the Catholic Workers is informed by the Scriptures, and how sincere they are in their faith.

In his opinion, “Western Europe is in a post-Christian, post-belief situation.” He said, “The modernized generation has thrown out the spiritual baby with the religious bathwater.” Current trends within religion and spirituality, like evangelical Christianity and New Age spirituality, encourage within people a sense of “privatized optimism,” in which people feel happy and comfortable as long as they are doing what they believe they must do in order to be “saved” or feel fulfilled. But they leave little room for consideration of the wider society. Even though the radical message of the Catholic Workers is very different from traditional Catholicism, it maintains the more communal outlook found in Catholicism, rather than the more individualistic one typical of Protestantism, which makes it less attractive to people in such a modernized society. At this point, the organization is small, but the group exhibits a great deal of faith and commitment.

The Dublin Catholic Worker group exhibits many of the characteristics people said they hope to see the Church adopt. Their mission is informed by Scripture, and they work for social justice at both local and global levels — the work with the local homeless and poor people, and they also participate in protests and actions against wars and other injustices abroad. They are community-oriented — Ciaron, Damien and Fran live together in the Catholic Worker house, where they have liturgies and meetings, and allow visitors to stay. They are definitely working on the margins, because they have no official
ties to or funding from the Catholic hierarchy. Even though some of their tactics, like the disabling of the jet at Shannon Airport, are highly controversial, it seems that, in many ways the Dublin Catholic Worker embodies the future of the Catholic Church, as described by the interviewees.

Conclusions

The Catholic Church is one of the oldest human institutions in the world — it has been in existence for two thousand years. Throughout the centuries it has had many different incarnations, and as I was reminded by the people I interviewed, it has not always been an institution with great power. It has, in the relatively recent past here in Ireland, been a Church that operated on the periphery — in hiding and hedge schools. Since then it has experienced power and wealth, which many people on the radical end of the spectrum believe diluted the message of the Scriptures. While more traditional accounts of the “fall” of the Church tend to emphasize factors outside the Church’s control, like the changes in the moral and socioeconomic climate of the country, those with a more radical view instead turn a critical eye inwards. They look at the ways the Church has failed to live up to the example set forth in the Bible. Rather than look back nostalgically, they would like to see Catholicism in Ireland progress forward, and, in doing so, return to its roots as a small, active group of people committed to living out what they believe to be the message of Christ.

It has been difficult to convey all I learned through this project. One of the most important things I will take away from the experience is affirmation that there is more to Catholicism than my own experience. It is fascinating that that one religion can
encompass such a wide spectrum of beliefs, such diversity. Before embarking on this study, I had almost no exposure to the more liberal wing of Catholicism, much less the radical Catholicism I encountered here. Growing up I never found resonance in Church because my interpretations of Christ’s message did not match up with those of the priest or the teacher. I always felt like they were missing the point, that there was more to it than rules and rhetoric, but I did not have the language or theological knowledge to articulate it. During the course of this study, I found people who can articulate the ideas that I never could, and as a result, I have experienced feelings of great relief and affirmation. This project marked the beginning of new phase of my own spiritual journey, and I forward to going where it takes me next.
Appendix

Left: The former “Black Church.”

Below: The Chapel at the ILAC Shopping Center.
Right: The Jesus shrine on O’Connell Street.
Above: The Mary statue on Dominick Street.

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