

Life after

Cloyne

HOW PRIESTS ARE FEELING

By *Sue Leonard*

First there was the Ferns Report; then came the Ryan and Murphy Reports. Revelations of clerical child sexual abuse rocked the nation. We hoped such events were in the past. But the Cloyne Report showed that the lessons hadn't been learned and that the church's own child protection guidelines were not being observed. And that proved even harder to stomach.

It's bad enough for committed Catholics to witness their church in such disarray. How much worse, then, for priests who find themselves at the coalface of the Irish church. How are they coping with the Cloyne fallout? We asked three priests to tell us how they are feeling now.



“There will have to be changes”

Fr Paddy Byrne, Co Carlow

Fr Paddy Byrne, a priest in Bagenalstown, County Carlow, is feeling deeply disappointed with, and disconnected from, the Irish Catholic Church.

“I'm disillusioned with the church, but not with my ministry. I feel absolutely dismayed by the church's poor leadership, and by the pathetic witness to renewal,” he says. “Bishop Magee showed arrogance and clericalism, and he was selected by Rome. They put rank before vision.

“I don't feel like walking away from the priesthood, but I do feel that if I am to remain there will have to be changes. The idea of a celibate priesthood, for example, makes us vulnerable and alone. And I don't think that has any connection with the Gospel.

“Not everyone feels as I do. Some of my peers blame the media for the scandal. Others are silent through fear and a blind reverence to the establishment. I went to Carlow College, and I was lucky. It was a small seminary, and it was closing the doors to a clerical church and opening up to a new way of thinking.”

Fr Byrne is 37. He was ordained 10 years ago, after having

tried another path first.

“After school I studied politics and economics in Trinity College for two years, but I felt a strong desire to serve as a priest among the people, because the Gospel I loved was calling to me.”

Despite all the scandals, lay people have never criticised him.

“They are even more friendly now than they were two years ago (when the Ryan Report came out). I'm part of a family here. I've been in the parish for five years and have never had a bad comment. I preached about Cloyne openly and honestly. I talked about the issues I have been hurt by. And I got a big round of applause.

“I get my support from friends and family, but priests need more official support. Our bishop resigned over the Murphy Report, and Rome has left us without a leader for two years. That's appalling. But in spite of that, at the core I am as happy, if not happier, than my contemporaries. My ministry of listening, engagement, and witnessing God's love for the sick and for all of us is fantastic. This is a wonderful way of life.”



“I can’t understand it”

Fr Patrick Rushe, Dundalk, Co Louth

Fr Patrick Rushe, 42, National Co-ordinator for Diocesan Vocations, is feeling very angry over the Cloyne Report.

“I feel, ‘here we go again.’ We all thought that there was redress being made, and we’re disappointed yet again. None of the abuse should have happened. But Cloyne particularly should not have happened. There should not have been that neglect. I can’t understand it.

“Bishop Magee clearly abdicated his responsibility to look after this issue,” he says. “I think he knew a lot of the priests personally, and maybe at times he felt pulled between acting for justice and being compassionate towards the men in his diocese. Child safeguarding issues should be handled by a neutral independent office.”

Fr Rushe’s job is to support and encourage priests in their role. Is that especially hard right now?

“It’s hard, but there’s no guess work involved. I have to encourage priests to have hope for the future. There are men coming through who are dedicated to making the church better. That hope is there. It is my job to keep that hope alive.”

And it’s not about separating from Rome.

“We are the Roman Catholic Church. We can’t segregate from who we are, but we can take action against the bad. The vast majority of priests are good and hard working in their

parishes. They entered as a conscious decision, and they know the realities of the church. More than one has said to me, ‘I want to be part of the solution.’

“We have to look at the church from a human level and realise that it is faith that is important. I was at a wedding today with a couple on a spiritual journey together. There were thousands of people at the blessing of the graves last week. They were there with faith in their hearts.”

Father Rushe has been personally attacked with negative remarks. And there have been a few abusive phone calls and emails.

“I do feel vulnerable,” he says. “And when I need support I go to trusted friends. And I pray. I turn to my own spiritual life.”

Fr Rushe feels especially sorry for older priests, who have been serving the church for decades.

“They’ve led a regimented existence, and were taught in the seminary not to break rank. There was almost a military mindset. They may not be able now to speak out against the church. Yet they must be feeling deeply disappointed.

“I remain hopeful because of my faith. And I also know this is a very urgent time for the church. Something needs to be done. It can’t be delayed for much longer.”



“Cloyne was a disaster”

Fr Bryan Shortall, Dublin

Fr Bryan Shortall, a Capuchin Franciscan working in Halston Street and Church Street Dublin, is sad and de-energised.

“It hurts deeply,” he says. “I’m trying to work in the community and these things pull the rug from under us.

“Cloyne was a disaster. I didn’t realise there were still bishops who were not reporting child abuse. It’s breathtaking. Shocking. The fact that information seems to have been deliberately withheld is what hurts.

“I have huge respect for the survivors, like Andrew Madden, Colm O’Gorman, and Marie Collins. There are so many victims. They have suffered so much. I would love the day to come when they could say, ‘The church is gaining credibility again in Ireland.’ And I would love to hear words of consolation from the Vatican. I’d love to see some good leadership.”

Fr Shortall has a good support system in place.

“I’ve always believed in spiritual direction and supervision. I have a good spiritual director. I also have my family and friends to support me. They have said, ‘Stick in there. We know there are good priests.’ People fill me with so much strength. Archbishop Diarmuid Martin consoles me, too. He has Cloyne at his heart and he wants to make things right.”

What changes would he like to see?

“Cloyne makes change inevitable,” he says. “The church is still relevant. The message of Jesus Christ has never been as relevant. The parish has its own struggles and cares. These are hard times, especially for the poor and broken hearted. Jesus Christ is very much with these people who have been abused by the men of God. That is the key. That is the most important thing now.”