

## Priorities for the ACI?

***ACI member, writer and historian, Sean O'Conaill offers some challenging questions and suggestions for the budding ACI to consider:***

If the programme for this pontificate is to release the Catholic Church from 'self-referentiality' and narcissism, how best could the ACI respond? Is our own published statement of objectives in any way vulnerable to a charge of ecclesiastical narcissism - focused mainly as it is upon internal church reforms that members prioritise?

It's true that inclusivity is a consistent theme of those objectives - and that we need to identify the many sources of alienation in the church's present culture - but how would the ACI respond to a charge that we are still too inwardly-focused and apparently oblivious of the direst needs of the Irish poor? Could it help our 'cred' with all those Catholics suspicious of us if we were to show a deeper concern to address those needs too, under the banner of Catholic Social Teaching?

I find myself deeply drawn especially to a key principle of that teaching: that all of us have an infinite and equal dignity. It was surely a failure of the Irish church generally to actuate that principle that led to the horrors reported by the Ferns, Dublin and Ryan inquiries into abuse within the church. Could Ireland's Catholic bishops easily resist an appeal from the ACI and the ACP to sponsor an annual national conference on how as a community of faith we are all to become active in ensuring that our church will now fully embody that principle, and properly challenge the many ghastly inequalities of Irish society? If we did that, how could we then be accused of self-referentiality? And how could more conservative Catholic movements stand aloof?

I truly believe that Christianity is the best hope of restoring to the Irish people generally a consciousness of their own inalienable and equal dignity (read 'worth'). I hold to our church still for that reason, despite the blemishes that speak of deep persisting inequalities of dignity within it. I do so because the church has nevertheless taught me to read the Gospel, and to interpret my own subject, History, through that lens. I believe that it has even explained to me why the direst inequalities burgeon in postmodern global society, and how they are to be addressed.

*"We are afflicted by a congenital uncertainty as to our own value."* This observation by the British philosopher Alain De Botton summarises my own assessment of what has always been wrong with us humans. It is the constant instability of our own self-esteem, and our resulting inclination to prove our worth to others, that makes us 'upwardly mobile' where possible - and social inequality and conflict need no more complex explanations. I dimly suspected this when I first fully heard the Gospel passage: *"Also a dispute arose among them (the apostles) as to which of them was considered to be greatest."* (e.g. Luke 22:24) A lifetime of reading and observation has confirmed it. The Bible is without question the key text for unlocking the mystery of human history, as René Girard also argues.

It is surely our church's long dubious association with political power and with social elites that made its pastors unable to focus explicitly this particular problem of status-seeking (biblical 'worldliness'). This also led to an unbalanced moralism focused too heavily on sexuality. So when our bishops see consumerism, many blame it still on a post-Enlightenment philosophy - materialism. The fact that all advertising reveals that people needlessly buy luxury products simply to be seen as 'worth it' too often escapes their notice - as does the fact that careerism in the church has precisely the same origin. We all mistakenly 'look to each other for glory' as Jesus put it. For 'glory' read 'status' - you need no deeper explanation of the injustice and conflict that troubles and baffles the world, or of the clericalism and internal rivalry that disgraces and divides the church. Or of Ireland's boom and crash for that matter.

And that is another key truth for the ACI to grasp. The main reason that Irish bishops are reluctant to engage with the ACP and (probably) the ACI is surely a perception that rival loci of power and authority are in the making and must be eschewed. My advice to both would be to be constantly aware of this and to seek means of reassurance. Rivalry mustn't be our bag either.

And that's my other reason for recommending that both the ACI and the ACP should consider a request to the Irish Bishops Conference to establish an Irish annual conference centred on Catholic Social Teaching. Focused outwards, priests don't need to be in rivalry with bishops, and nor do lay people. We each have our own proper sphere of responsibility. To resolve our internal tensions we need to be seeking common ground, and the need to better address the enveloping crisis of Irish self-esteem and deprivation surely provides that. If we all prioritise the Great Commandment, and look earnestly for some way of meeting and talking together, 'no evil should we fear'.

*Sean O'Conaill*  
*July 2013*