



Bishops are paralysed by their own unaccountability

Sean O'Conaill - 16th March 2014

Bishops' mitres - spires on heads - have always been for me an occasion of sin. Since early boyhood I have been unable to see a mitre overtopping any crowd without wishing I had a catapult.

But is this impulse really sinful, I now wonder. Might it not instead be an inevitable consequence of my Christian baptism? Originating in their present shape not in the early church but in the Middle Ages - when the younger sons of the nobility often became bishops by right of inheritance rather than genuine vocation - don't mitres have far more to do with social ascendancy and privilege than servant leadership? Don't they now still symbolise the tendency of bishops to be aloof, unaccountable and secretive - a barrier to genuine Catholic communion rather than harbingers of the Kingdom of God at ground level?

Pope Francis is obviously bent on changing this perception of Catholic leadership, but so far our Irish bishops generally show no sign of loosening up socially - or of breaking down the Chinese wall that separates them from easy communion with the 21st century. Francis hasn't yet abolished the key aristocratic privilege that enables all bishops to remain inaccessible on all important questions - their canonical unaccountability to those they supposedly serve. It is this that still dictates that whenever Irish bishops meet their assembled people the asking of tricky questions will be impossible.

It was this privilege above all others that allowed Irish bishops within living memory to fob off and deceive the parents of Irish Catholic children who had been abused by errant clergy. To the disgrace of the Catholic hierarchy, this crime has not yet merited the dismissal of any bishop anywhere.

To provide a temporary facade of accountability on child safety in the wake of a media storm, Irish bishops established in 2007 the National Board for the Safeguarding of Children (NBSCCC). However, now that this storm has somewhat abated we hear from Ian Elliott, the highly respected former CEO of the NBSCCC, that in company with heads of the Irish religious congregations our bishops have been progressively reducing the funding of the board over the past four years - without the slightest sign of an explanation.

And now we learn that an NBSCCC report on an audit of child safeguarding provision in one diocese did not contain serious negative findings by Elliott himself, before he retired from

his role as CEO of the NBSCCC. We would not know this at all were it not for Elliott's doggedness, even after he left the NBSCCC.

And now the Irish Bishops Conference, in its statement following its March 2014 conference, totally fails to address the concerns Elliott has raised. A mere verbal assurance on its commitment to the NBSCCC, without detailed rebuttal of Elliott's allegations on funding, can only strengthen suspicion that the latter have substance.

How on earth can Catholic parents continue to trust in the independence and effectiveness of the NBSCCC in these circumstances? The power of our bishops to preview and comment on NBSCCC reports on their dioceses before those reports are published - and to control its funding - totally undermines the claims of the bishops that the board is truly independent.

It is their canonical unaccountability that allows bishops to evade any open question from their own people on such matters, and to meet behind closed doors every quarter in Maynooth on an agenda known only to Heaven. None has shown the slightest sign of noticing that this aloofness is a key component of the 'secularisation' they lament in Ireland - the increasing irrelevance of the clerical church as a force for social renewal and the generally low expectation of their people that anything will ever change.

So far no Catholic bishop - not even the pope - has addressed the key question that arises out of the clerical abuse catastrophe: why did no bishop anywhere prioritise the safety of Catholic children until compelled to do so by an external media storm? What was it about the bishop's inherited role that prevented him discharging spontaneously that key Christian obligation to the most vulnerable members of his flock?

Could it have been, for example, the combination of unaccountable executive power with responsibility for pastoral care of their people? Is the latter actually compatible with the former?

I am now convinced that it isn't. Bishops cannot be credible pastors until diocesan administration is made representative of and transparent to the People of God - and the bishop is given a predominantly pastoral role. If the Irish church is now a safer place for Catholic children, this is entirely owing to the separation of powers, and a vigilant media, in secular society - not the continuing concentration of power in the hands of bishops. It was that despicable system that made every Catholic child vulnerable to the vilest abuse.

Our Irish bishops have not yet sought to measure the collapse of trust in that unchanging system in their own country. It will take far more than a distant, amiable papacy to restore that trust. It is time for Irish bishops themselves to undo the immense harm they have recently caused the Irish Catholic Church - by unbinding themselves from the straitjacket that makes them evangelically impotent and even ridiculous, the straitjacket of their unaccountability to their own people.