



Is Catholic Ireland Dead?



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During his historic visit to Ireland in 1979, Pope St. John Paul II prophetically warned the 300,000 people gathered in Limerick for Mass:

“Lay people today are called to a strong Christian commitment: to permeate society with the leaven of the Gospel, for Ireland is at a point of decision in her history. The Irish people have to choose today their way forward. What a victory [the Devil] would gain, what a blow he would inflict on the Body of Christ in the world, if he could seduce Irish men and women away from Christ. Now is the time of testing for Ireland.”

For centuries, Ireland had been a defender and promoter of the Catholic faith. And yet, on May 25, 2018, the Irish people chose the wrong way forward, with 66.4% voting to repeal the 8th Amendment, thereby revoking the right to life extended to unborn persons in the Constitution of Ireland. On September 18, legal abortion took effect with President Michael Higgins signing the new bill into law.

For many Catholics around the world, the victory of secularist ideology

About the Author



Timothy T. O'Donnell is the president of Christendom College, where he teaches courses in history and theology. He was the first layman to receive both his licentiate and doctoral degrees in ascetical and mystical theology from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum) in Rome. He has taught at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, California, and at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California. He is a Knight Grand Cross in the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, and he is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for the Family. Additionally, he is the author of *Heart of the Redeemer and Swords Around the Cross: The Nine Years War*. He has filmed many programs for the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), including *Glory of the Papacy* and *Luke: Meek Scribe of Christ*. Dr. O'Donnell and his wife, Cathy, live in Stephens City, Virginia, and have nine children and 12 grandchildren.

in Ireland—considered by many to be a last bulwark of Christian civilization—came as a shock. It is now a fair question to ask: is Catholic Ireland dead?

Not a few Irish-American Catholics find that this question touches on a core element of their religious and cultural identity, myself included.

Indeed, my early childhood was filled with stories and historical recollections of how great it was to be an Irish Catholic. As a young schoolboy traveling with my brothers and sisters on a public bus to our Catholic school, we encountered a happy old Irishman by the name of Morrison. When he learned that we were O'Donnells, he gave us a whole series of books to help us discover our Irish heritage. Every other day we received a new book about the Emerald Isle, her people, her history, her folklore and traditions.

In particular, amid the turbulent, social chaos of the 1960s, reading Robert Reilly's *The Fighting Prince of Donegal* about Red Hugh O'Donnell helped deepen my love for my Catholic faith and for all things Irish. For me, the two seemed historically inseparable. Ireland's history and culture were so deeply intertwined with the Catholic faith introduced by St. Patrick that a truly glorious tradition of monastic and missionary outreach became possible to the lands that would one day be Christendom.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Generations of great Irish saints helped build the Christian world: St. Brigid, St. Finbar, St. Enda, St. Kieran, St. Columcille, St. Columbanus, St.

Ita, St. Gall, St. Kilian, St. Aidan, and so many others. There was such a veritable deluge of saints from the fifth to the ninth centuries that Ireland became known as *insula sanctorum et doctorum*, the Island of Saints and Scholars.

Down through the centuries, the history of Ireland has been one of holding fast to the faith amid adversity. Battles with the pagan Vikings and the triumph of Brian Boru at Clontarf delivered a pivotal victory to Christian civilization. Next came the violence of the Norman Invasion in 1179, followed by years of persecution after the Henrician Revolution and Protestant Revolt, which was characterized by the effort to transform the nation into "John Bull's other island." This was a time of armed conflict and defense of the Faith. Out of the conflict, however, a Catholic nation and people emerged, even if without a state. Through all of these countless years of penal laws, Mass Rocks, hedge schools, and great hunger, Ireland's people remained largely faithful to the divine faith brought to their shores by St. Patrick.

Finally, in 1916 a blow was struck for Irish independence, with a bold proclamation of a republic that would "cherish all the children of the nation equally." That uprising led to the War of Independence and the establishment of the Irish Free State, which triumphantly hosted the great International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin in 1932. Eventually, Ireland was proclaimed a Republic and given a constitution in 1937, with a preamble that declared Ireland's true allegiance, beginning with the words, "In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority."

Éamon de Valera, who became president and who authored the constitution, wrote: “You sometimes hear Ireland charged with a narrow and intolerant nationalism, but Ireland today has no dearer hope than this: that, true to her holiest traditions, she should humbly serve the truth, and help by truth to save the world.”

Studying Irish history has taught me that Catholic beliefs and morality need not be distant ideals for a modern state. On the contrary, an authentic Catholic identity truly embraced by a nation can lead to the best of national identities that respects the dignity of all human life, if only its people can persevere in faith.

WHAT I SAW IN IRELAND

For me, the Ireland of my dreams became a concrete, lived reality when I began visiting the island in 1973. On my first visit, I hitchhiked all over the country, finding a warm welcome in the home of a farmer in County Cavan. I also journeyed to Donegal, visiting Fr. McDyer’s Glencolmcille and attending the Holy Sacrifice at a Mass Rock high in those remote northern highlands.

As president of Christendom College, I have led students on many pilgrimages to Ireland over the years. Sharing the vibrant Catholic culture and traditions with my pupils has been one of my greatest joys as a teacher. However, in the spring of 2018, we faced a stark reality when we, as pilgrims, witnessed Ireland revolt against her national identity.

We were in Ireland on May 25, 2018, a day that the United Nations had ironically declared “missing

RECENT IRISH HISTORY

- **1979 JPII visits; 1 million in Phoenix Park**
- **1983 Pro-life 8th amendment passes 841,000 to 416,000**
- **1986 A referendum to allow divorce as a constitutional amendment is defeated**
- **1992 The X Case – Supreme Court allows 14-year-old to travel to England for an abortion**
- **1993 Homosexual acts decriminalized; consent put at 17, public opposes**
- **1995 Referendum reintroduced, legalization of divorce by 9,000 votes**
- **1996 Irish Republic legalized provision for information and advice on abortion**
- **2015 So-called “gay” marriage recognized**
- **2018 8th amendment repealed on May 25, ironically declared “Missing Child Day” by U.N.**

child day.” Having climbed Croagh Patrick the previous day and having attended Mass at the great Marian Shrine of Knock that morning, we traveled to Dublin. It seemed that every light post in the city boasted posters urging a “yes” vote to Repeal the 8th Amendment to the Irish constitution, which read:

“The state acknowledges the right to life of the unborn child and with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect and as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.”

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We arrived in Dublin that Friday afternoon and visited Kilmainham jail. While in the jail, we stopped outside Michael Mallin's cell and read, with tears, his last letter to his wife and children before his execution for his role in the 1916 uprising. Just before confessing to a Capuchin friar, he had pleaded with his family always to remember "that Ireland must never forget that she is Catholic." We ended our visit to the jail with a prayer on the exact spot where the brave men were shot in the aftermath of the uprising.

When we returned to the streets, we witnessed giddy excitement as reports from the exit polls indicated a shocking landslide for the "yes" campaign. Jubilant people, mostly young, gathered spontaneously in the courtyard of Dublin Castle (ironically, the seat of English power in Ireland for eight centuries), and a wild celebration began. On Saturday morning we traveled through boisterous crowds around Trinity College where young people rejoiced in their victory. Later that evening, our group traveled to Bl. John Henry Newman's chapel to celebrate the Vigil Mass for Trinity Sunday, even as the celebration of the national apostasy continued.

The *Irish Times*, in its editorial dealing with the referendum, wrote:

"The 8th amendment describes a

world that never existed—a place of moral absolutism, religious certainty, good and evil, black and white—and locks us into that illusion in perpetuity. To remove it is merely to reflect the world we live in."

The snakes were back in Ireland, and they were hissing. I was reminded of the Hebrews in the desert celebrating Moses' absence and raising the golden calf in revelry. The feverish storming of the Bastille also came to mind. The glee and festivity, even to some who had voted "yes," were deeply horrifying.

The Irish Prime Minister, Leo Varadkar, who three years earlier ran for office as a pro-life candidate, urged the electorate the day before the referendum to "end the centuries of shame." As he dropped his ballot in the box, he grinned and said, "All the lads in the gym are voting yes."

When the final tally came in, 66.4% had voted "yes" for repeal; 33.6% had voted "no." About 1.2 million of those eligible to vote did not even show up, which means that 42.5% of the entire electorate voted "yes."

Eoin O'Malley opined in the *Irish Independent* concerning the vote:

"Today we discovered Ireland's past really is a foreign country."

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE EMERALD ISLE?

How on earth did Ireland, whose faith and Catholic culture emerged as a powerful force for good after centuries of hardship, get to this devastating point?

When all the votes were tallied on May 25, which many pro-lifers dubbed “bloody Friday,” it was revealed that 84% of the 18- to 25-year-olds voted for abortion. That the vast majority of these young people had attended Catholic schools may not surprise many Americans. The erosion of Catholic education is not unique to our country but is, rather, an international epidemic. In Ireland, the U.S., and elsewhere, parents have sent their children to Catholic schools and universities for decades, only to find that their sons and daughters have been taught to conform to secular norms and compromise their Catholic faith.

Furthermore, the Internet and modern systems of communication have facilitated the dislocation of the Irish people from their national identity, so that, today, young people in Ireland have more in common culturally with their peers in the European Union, North America, and England than with their parents and grandparents.

A lack of Catholic formation rendered most Irish people unprepared when the forces of the Culture of Death began using the 8th Amendment as a scapegoat for a host of issues. The amendment caused women to die, they said; it caused rape victims to suffer; it caused women with terminally ill babies to be denied “health care”; it caused the death of Savita Halappanavar, who while pregnant died of a sepsis blood infection.

The cards were stacked in favor of the Culture of Death in nearly every influential aspect of Irish society. All major media outlets were pro-abortion; all political parties in Ireland favored repeal; the prime

minister, the minister of health, and the minister of children all favored repeal; and foreign money was pouring into the country. Decades of horrible catechetics in Catholic schools, a deep failure of episcopal leadership, and intense anger at the Catholic Church rendered the Church’s voice impotent to turn back the overwhelming tide.

The Catholic Church had accomplished so much for the people of Ireland since the liberation of the Church in 1829. She had addressed hunger, disease, mass immigration; she had created educational structures and social services and supported the newly established Irish Free State in the midst of the nation’s extreme poverty. But the hostile media has ignored all the support the Church has given to the Irish people, instead drawing attention to the very real sins of some of her children.

The true record of the Church in the current cultural climate could not be objectively examined, as the Irish media painted the Church narrowly in light of the clerical abuse scandals; the Magdalene Laundries, the mother-based home in Tuam where 800 unwed mothers’ babies died and were buried without ceremony; the Christian Brothers industrial schools, where children of the poor were mistreated; and reports of a horrific adoption system for children of unwed mothers operated illegally. The torrent of coverage of scandal gradually eroded the public’s trust in the institutional Church.

In addition, it was estimated that nearly 3,500 Irish women traveled annually to England for abortions, and nearly 2,000 procured illegal abortifacient drugs to terminate

their pregnancies at home without any interference from the state.

It was a perfect storm.

We should be rightly horrified that children were abused, women treated shamefully, babies interred without a proper funeral and burial. And yet, should not this horror also extend to the recognition of the reality of abortion, which is the ultimate child abuse?

Is Ireland, then, a different country today? The answer is, undoubtedly, yes. The country whose constitution begins with an invocation of the Holy Trinity has now established that no human being has a natural, God-given right to life. The state has the power to give life or take it away. “Choice” has now become the *summum bonum*, even more important than a child’s life.

Children will learn that the most fundamental human relationship between a mother and child is insignificant, for now a mother is a woman who can choose to love and welcome her child, or she can choose to murder her child. For men, the gift of fatherhood, with its responsibility to protect their children, no longer holds legal standing. When a father has no role in the life of or even right to protect his unborn child, the family will weaken, and increased chaos in society will result.

I ask once again, is Catholic Ireland, in fact, dead? I do not believe this vote necessarily signals the death of Catholic Ireland, but it certainly points to the collapse of the greater part of a Catholic culture and people.

The truth is everlasting, and resurrections do happen. Generations of heroic witness to the Catholic faith cannot be forgotten or nullified by a single vote. The Irish people have an immense patrimony and noble past from which they could still draw strength and vitality.

However, any country that attempts to bury its history and traditions will have no future and certainly will have no posterity to look forward to. One of the principle dangers of this vote is the desire to forget the past.

The demonic has certainly been a key part of this drama. When helpless children who depend upon their parents and society for protection are left defenseless in the name of “compassion,” “health,” “women’s rights,” “equality,” “tolerance,” and “progress,” then these words have clearly lost all meaning. A prominent Catholic family who defended the pro-life cause received an avalanche of hateful emails, one of which threatened to “graffiti their house with fetal blood.” There can be no doubt the Evil One is present.

When evils such as contraception, divorce, and same-sex marriage are welcomed into a country, death is at the door, and he will not stop his assault there. The thought that “we will not go further” is certainly naïve in the extreme.

William Butler Yeats’ celebrated poem “The Second Coming” comes to mind in the wake of this vote:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

*The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and
everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the
worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

A PATH FORWARD?

We have seen this horror of child sacrifice before in the golden fields of Palestine or along the plains of North Africa, and we have continued to witness the satanic hatred of children and innocence down through the corridors of time. History bears witness to the failure of civilizations that tread upon God's gift of life with such hatred.

Therefore, for Americans, Irish, and people of good will everywhere, this is not a time to be silent but to speak out.


When the international abortion industry begins to set up its clinics in Ireland, the horror will spread. More women will be wounded, more children will be

killed, and the nation will "come to know good and evil" in a new way.

It is important for all of us to see clearly and grasp reality. Let the awakened Catholics, who make up the majority of the pro-life opposition, begin with a deep reform of the Church, seminaries, Catholic schools, and catechetics. The pro-life laity, zealous priests, and bishops must lead the way in a new evangelization in fidelity to Jesus Christ and His Church. Catholic families, faithful parishes, and committed Catholic communities in Ireland and around the world will show us the way forward to the new Springtime in the Church.

The evils of infidelity and abortion will only be cast out with prayer and fasting. A deep renewal of the Church is necessary for the conversion of any society that has welcomed the Culture of Death. Authentic holiness, with its passion for truth and zeal for souls, is the answer to this great evil. As our Lord said to St. Paul when he hesitated to proclaim the Gospel in pagan Corinth:

"Do not fear but speak and do not keep silence: because I am with thee and I have many in this city who are my friends" (Acts 18:9-10).

Many thousands of faithful Catholics still live in Ireland. One-third or 723,632 of Irish voters on May 25 opposed abortion. Let us pray for their courage and fortitude, that a new generation will rise from the ashes, reclaim their glorious past and build a new future, trusting in our Lord, who said: "Fear not for I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16:33), for He is with us "all the days even until the consummation of the world" (Matt. 28:20). 

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