

This is a sorry affair for everyone involved

THE allegations of misconduct among seminarians attending St Patrick's College in Maynooth are not a surprise to anyone who has kept a close eye on life there over the past two decades. Not for the first time, there are allegations of a drinking and gay subculture in the college, now augmented by claims that newer technology, in the form of gay dating app Grindr, is used by some of the seminarians.

It seems sad that if indeed some, or many, of the seminarians are gay, they feel they have to sublimate their identity in the priesthood, rather than being able to express it openly like many of their secular peers. But, no matter whether you agree with it or not, celibacy is a central tenet of what it means to be a priest, and it is understandable that those who genuinely believe it, and wish to dedicate themselves only to their ministries, would find it difficult to co-exist in such an environment. Speaking to Keelin Shanley on RTE Radio 1 yesterday, the head of St Patrick's, Monsignor Hugh Connolly, downplayed the allegations and denied there was an active gay culture in the college, and also said whistleblowers had nothing to fear if there was something they wished to report.

The evidence, sadly, appears to suggest the opposite, and former students have come forward to say that some who made allegations were dismissed, while others, seeing the fate that awaited if they spoke out, simply left.

Everything about this situation is sad. For some, the sadness comes from being forced to become what they are not. For others, it comes from wanting to embrace the totality of priestly life, but finding themselves in an environment that is not conducive to that outcome.

We have a vocational crisis in Ireland, with nowhere near enough priests coming through the system to replace those who should already have retired. Monsignor Connolly and his board of management really need to get a tighter rein on this situation. There is no need for witch-hunts, but anyone contemplating the religious life must be informed of the basic standards required of candidates, and make the correct choice between celibacy and active sexuality.

Shocking death toll

THE death yesterday of a man in a road crash in Donegal brings to six the number killed on the county's roads in nine days in three incidents, a number that seems hugely disproportionate to the population. Naturally, we send our condolences to his family and we fervently hope that there will be no more fatalities.

That said, it is undeniable that Co. Donegal has a long history of tragic accidents, often involving young people in cars carrying more passengers than there are seat belts. Certainly, the frequency of accidents suggests a serious study must be carried out and if that means roads need to be improved, or more simply, that a major public safety campaign needs to be launched, it must be conducted without delay. The people of Co. Donegal have the same rights to travel in safety as those in every county.

Cheer on our heroes

SADLY, all the early headlines about the Olympics have been about boxer Michael O'Reilly testing positive for a banned substance and now planning to launch an appeal. It is easy to forget that he is just one of more than 70 Irish men and women who will push themselves to the limits to bring medals home on behalf of their country. The next two weeks will bring great success or crushing disappointment but, one way or the other, they deserve our support. It's time to get behind Team Ireland and cheer every one of them to victory.

IN 2010, I was invited by this newspaper to write a piece on how the Irish Catholic Church could rebuild following the clerical sex abuse crisis. I had, since 2006, been lecturing in the Philosophy Department at NUI Maynooth (NUIM). Among my students were seminarians from St Patrick's College – the National Seminary – which shares a campus with NUIM.

Knowing that I was a columnist for this newspaper, a group of seminarians approached me with what turned out to be explosive allegations. They reported that the seminary was a 'hotbed of promiscuity' in which all manner of permissive behaviour was either overlooked or actively encouraged. They also said that those who opposed this culture were ostracised and, in some cases, removed from the seminary.

At first, I was highly dubious of their claims. However, as I spoke to more seminarians I found there was a consistent narrative which was both shocking and deeply saddening. As a committed Catholic, I was dismayed that the future priests of this country were being trained in such an appalling environment.

It was against this background that I wrote my first column on the future of Irish Catholicism. My contention was that the Church could never recover until it was cleansed from within. Primarily, that meant training priests in accordance with the highest spiritual and moral virtues. As one seminarian put it to me: 'If the car is faulty, you must go back to the factory and deal with the root of the problem.' And so I suggested that there must be systematic reform of the seminaries – reform so radical that the Irish priesthood would return to the path of the righteousness. No longer could decent young men, who had given up their lives for something sacred, be denied a vocation simply because they opposed what they perceived as something profane.

FOLLOWING the publication of that article, correspondence swept across my desk. Dozens of men who had spoken out against the permissive culture in the seminary, and who were subsequently shown the door, wrote of how their lives had been ruined. Many had simply given up their vocation, while others had joined religious orders.

Old and young wrote to say that the National Seminary was a place of profound moral decay, and that it was no place for those in pursuit of holiness. Priests came forward with their own sad stories. They reported knowing what was going on in Maynooth, but rather than make a fuss and be expelled, they kept their heads down in order to get ordained.

I simply could not believe that a place which trained people to stand 'in the person of Christ', could tolerate such apparent moral laxity. And yet, the story was always the same: an unhealthy obsession with sex permeated all aspects of seminary life. Those more interested in the life of sanctity were made to feel odd, were forbidden to pray and live as you might expect a priest should.

Here is an excerpt from one letter which was typical of those I received:

'I entered Maynooth Seminary with an open mind, conscious that the path to the priesthood would be fraught with great challenges. The "Spiritual" or "Introductory Month" began without incident. The talks and group discussions were riddled with pop-psychology, but nothing scandalous occurred until we were launched into a "sexuality workshop" which lasted several

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As a philosophy lecturer in Maynooth, for years Mark Dooley reported on the poisonous culture of alcohol and sex that was pervasive at the seminary. After Diarmuid Martin's intervention this week, it is the beginning of the end for the institution



SATURDAY
ESSAY



by Dr Mark
Dooley

days. Those leading it displayed an unhealthy curiosity about any sexual activity the participants may have previously engaged in, to the point that we were each pressured into making pseudo-confessions to the group.'

The problem of alcoholism was, he said, another major feature: 'Several times every week, groups of seminarians would return from the bar causing havoc by banging on doors and, at times, gaining entry to other seminarians' rooms with the use of a master key. Once again, when incidents of this nature were reported to the directors of formation, the conversation would inevitably

focus on the reaction of the complainant, and nothing would be done to instil discipline or encourage self-control among the offending seminarians. It was not unknown for a candidate for the priesthood to become a full-blown alcoholic and to receive treatment for the condition.'

Thanks to what this particular seminarian called 'flawed formation', 'many became addicted to alcohol. Some left, disenchanted with their time in Maynooth. Some simply abandoned the Church, while others decided to compromise their faith in the hope of being able to salvage something after ordination. As I

continued to write and publish similar testimonies, more seminarians came forward – each with equally sensational claims. The National Seminary issued a statement denying all accusations levelled against it.

In 2011, I published a book entitled *Why Be A Catholic?* in which I outlined the whole sorry saga. I also suggested ways in which the Irish priesthood ought to be reformed. I know that American cardinal Timothy Dolan, who led the Apostolic Visitation to Maynooth in 2011, read my articles and that he had been given similar testimony during his visit to the seminary.

Why, then, has it taken so long for a leading Irish bishop to speak out against the 'strange goings-on' in Maynooth? Why, in other words, didn't those leading the Apostolic Visitation order root and branch reform of the seminary? They did, in fact, but the Irish Bishops' Conference closed ranks and refused to

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'Strange goings-on': St Patrick's College in Maynooth

budge on the issue. The fact that the Apostolic Report, which followed the visitation, is highly redacted presumably tells its own story.

The result was that no-one was held to account. Apart from some superficial changes, such as separate entrances to the college for seminarians and NUIM students, things remained as they were.

THIS was in stark contrast to the Irish College in Rome which, following a similar visitation, saw major structural and personnel changes.

Hence, it was no surprise to me to learn that a former seminarian at Maynooth, who alleges he was sexually harassed by a member of staff, has now taken his complaint to the gardai. Neither am I surprised by the allegations that some seminarians have accounts on the gay dating app Grindr. The only surprise is that Archbishop Diarmuid Martin has

broken ranks with his fellow bishops by labelling the atmosphere at Maynooth 'poisonous', and by saying that, henceforth, he intends sending his seminarians to the Irish College in Rome.

In my view, it is an act of supreme moral courage for such a senior Irish bishop to finally say 'enough is enough'.

For far too long, and despite regular accusations of moral and spiritual malpractice, Maynooth has been allowed to operate with impunity. That someone as senior as the Archbishop of Dublin, in whose diocese the seminary is, seems no longer willing to support it, surely suggests it is the beginning of the end.

The Irish Catholic Church is a remnant of its former self. It is crippled with self-inflicted wounds and a legacy of shame. And yet, despite everything, people still support it. Up and down the country, young and old continue to look to the Church for comfort, consolation, healing and help.

What affected me most when I first

started writing about Maynooth was the heartbreaking letters I received from ordinary parishioners devastated by what they were reading. They had spent their lives going to Mass and supporting their priests. They had suffered through the horrors of the child sex abuse crisis, and yet they continued going to church because, ultimately, it does not belong to clerics but to Christ.

However, it is an awful thing for a person of faith to have to confront the fact that their priests might not be what they seem. When a priest stands before the altar, he does so as an alter Christus or 'another Christ'. For a Catholic, that is the supreme spiritual calling and one that is worthy of the utmost trust.

Parishioners must be able to trust that their priests are trained to the highest standards. They must be able to trust that the person to whom they confess their sins is not leading a double life. 'Thou shalt not bear false witness' is, after all, a sacred commandment.

I know from personal experience

what it is like to have that trust shattered. One morning, I opened this newspaper to read that a priest had been accused of molesting two young girls. As I pondered his picture, I remembered that I had confessed my sins to him.

Responding to Archbishop Martin's decision, the Association of Catholic Priests asserted that the campaign against Maynooth was being driven by 'conservative commentators'. Is it 'conservative' to desire that priests strive for holiness, that they be men of moral integrity who sacrifice everything for their flock? Is it 'conservative' to hope that seminaries be places of sanctity rather than promiscuity?

No-one is more aware than I of the pressures placed on priests in this age of dwindling vocations.

In many cases, elderly priests struggle on well past the age of retirement, serving the needs of their parishioners. They all deserve our support, affection and care.

However, it is equally the case that unless a priest is properly formed, he

HOW I EXPOSED SEMINARY CHAOS

By Dr Mark Dooley

There are dark forces in the Church and they're ruining its chances of survival

Sin within the Church is born in seminaries

The winds of change stir in our seminaries

will never be capable of serving his people in the manner they deserve. The priesthood requires sacrifice, service and tireless commitment. That is why, from the moment a man enters the seminary, he needs to shed his old life so that he can conform to the requirements of the Church and parish life.

There is nothing Christ-like in a sexual and drinking culture which, as so many seminarians told me, prevails at Maynooth. This is not because that culture is wrong in itself, but simply because it is not the type of environment in which our future priests ought to be immersed. That is especially so when they are obligated by the Church to live a life of self-control and self-denial.

NO-ONE wants a return to the age of clericalism - an age when priests were given pride of place out of undue deference.

The priesthood should never be used as a path to privilege.

It is, to quote Cardinal Dolan, 'a call, not a career; a redefinition of self, not just a ministry; a way of life, not a job; a state of being, not a function; a permanent, lifelong commitment, not a temporary style of service; an identity, not a role'. And, he continues, 'to those who wonder if holiness, humility and identity are a Pollyannaish ignoring of deep psychological turmoil in the priesthood, I say...holiness means wholeness, and wholeness means integrity, and a man of integrity hardly abuses our youth or overlooks the crimes of those who do.'

As one elderly priest put it to me shortly after my first revelations in this paper: 'If only one eighth of what you say is true, Maynooth should be shut down.' That priest has lived a saintly life and simply could not understand how those running the seminary could allow such an atmosphere to fester. Neither could he understand how the bishops could allow it continue.

That many of our bishops now seem intent on supporting Maynooth rather than Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, suggests that they are, once again, refusing to face reality. And that reality is that the Irish Church will never recover so long as the seminary situation is not decisively dealt with once and for all.

That is why, despite its long and venerable history, Maynooth needs to be closed down for good. While we don't expect our priests to be perfect saints, the least we can hope is that they will aspire to saintliness.

One brave bishop believes that Maynooth no longer encourages that aspiration. Why his fellow prelates should assert otherwise is a mystery that the Irish Church can ill afford to indulge.