

Oireachtas privilege must be protected

THE Supreme Court action taken by former Rehab chief Angela Kerins concluded yesterday, with Mr Justice Frank Clarke reserving judgment and saying the case was 'important and difficult'. Ms Kerins is seeking damages arising from a 2014 Dáil Public Accounts Committee hearing – during which, she claims, robust questioning about her stewardship of the organisation led her to suffer loss of reputation and loss of employment.

So, yes, it is important and difficult, but in many ways also quite simple. All successful democracies have established, and maintain, the fundamental principle of absolute privilege – that is, a politician in the parliament building can say anything without fear. In turn, politicians are in that parliament only because we put them there. We elected them, and endorsed their right to say what they say without the threat of retaliation or prosecution.

If they go too far, it might seem harsh or unfair to an individual under scrutiny, but if we were to take the opposite path, it would mean that someone else, someone unelected, would gain control of what they were allowed to discuss.

As we know, that simply would mean the rich and powerful could silence public representatives and, by extension, jeopardise our right to see public servants and the bosses of publicly funded bodies held to account.

Safeguards already exist. If a politician's own colleagues think he or she has gone too far, they can publicly criticise that person and even move for formal censure. If the public feels a politician has treated someone unfairly, and think they would not like to be exposed to such rudeness or inappropriate questioning themselves, they have the ultimate safeguard in their gift – they can simply choose not to reelect that person.

Removing or even diluting absolute Oireachtas privilege would place unacceptable limits on politicians and would deeply damage our democracy. It would be a black day for Ireland.

Learn from mistake

THERE is not a shred of evidence that the Taoiseach, as Tourism Minister, intervened in any way to block planning permission for a wind farm near Donald Trump's Doonbeg golf resort in Co. Clare. Mr Varadkar's claim during a lunch in Washington DC, therefore, seems to have been more a case of 'I didn't do anything, but if the now US president wants to give me credit for it, I'll take it'.

In fact, in the planning files of both the local county council and An Bord Pleanála, there were multiple objections to the development, and good reasons why it was refused. In short, the Taoiseach gilded an anecdote and, for the sake of a laugh, used it for a little self-aggrandisement.

He is not a natural entertainer and should not try to be. Equally, his gaffe gives the impression of being slightly needy and wanting people to like him – but that is not a requirement of the job.

Most importantly, he should know that if you want to tell a funny story an Irish audience will hear, make it about anything other than planning, which has long been the subject of nod-and-a-wink fluidity with the rules.

The Taoiseach has now said he didn't make a phone call. He should learn from his mistake – and never do it again.

Come on Ireland!

AS we celebrate our national day, the entire country will come together as one this afternoon as Ireland take to the turf against England at Twickenham in a bid to win the Triple Crown and the Grand Slam in rugby's Six Nations. So, in the name of St Patrick, come on, you boys in green!

LAST Monday, former President Mary McAleese appeared on RTE's Today With Seán O'Rourke programme.

Having recently obtained global headlines with her searing denunciation of the Catholic Church as an 'empire of misogyny', Mrs McAleese used her appearance on the show to take aim at none other than Pope Francis.

The Pontiff, she claimed, is 'not a great strategist', but is a 'very spontaneous, almost scattergun person'. And, while these might be 'disarming and lovely' traits, we are, she believes, 'beyond the point where that is enough'.

It is not often you hear leading Catholic liberals so stridently criticise the current Pope. However, the former president wasn't finished. While acknowledging that Francis is, indeed, a 'reforming pope', he nevertheless presides over 'a male bastion of patronising platitudes', to which he himself adds 'his own quota'.

While many were shocked by her criticisms of this popular Pope, Mary McAleese is, in fact, not alone in finding fault with Francis. Indeed, on both sides of the Catholic divide, the Pope has his detractors – people who believe, like Mrs McAleese, that he hasn't gone far enough, and others who think his 'reforms' have gone much too far.

As it happens, Mrs McAleese's broadside against Francis coincided with the fifth anniversary of his election as Pope on March 13.

What began as a pontificate of great promise has, however, become one that is often unpredictable, complex and, at times, bitterly controversial. The Pope is universally admired for his emphasis on mercy and care of the environment. For many believers and non-believers alike, he is a beloved symbol of genuine Christian compassion.

MOREOVER, there is no doubting the enthusiasm and excitement his forthcoming visit to Ireland is eliciting. The Pope is scheduled to attend the World Meeting of Families which will be held here next August. And despite some negative comment regarding the cost, most people are eager for us to host the Pope.

It will, of course, be only the second papal visit to Ireland in history. When Pope Saint John Paul II visited in 1979, Ireland was a very different country.

As part of a delegation of altar boys from Dublin, I attended the Pope's Mass in the Phoenix Park.

I vividly remember John Paul's plane suddenly descending from the skies accompanied, on either side, by two military jets. Down below, 1.5million people ecstatically cheered as though they were witnessing a vision. Back then, the Irish Church was thriving, none of its dark secrets having yet been revealed.

This time, the Irish Church is a mere shadow of its former self. Recent revelations regard-

Can Pop Francis heal his divided Church?

His pontificate began with great promise, but as millions prepare to welcome him to Ireland, the pontiff faces growing challenges from critics on both sides...

SATURDAY
ESSAY



by Mark
Dooley

ing Newry priest Malachy Finnegan – a man who, as we learned this week, 'seriously, physically, sadistically' abused Mrs McAleese's brother – prove just how raw the scale and horror of the clerical child abuse scandal still are. Priestly vocations have collapsed, and our country appears intent on repudiating every vestige of its Catholic past.

Irish Catholics hope the Pope's visit will herald a new springtime in the Church's fortunes. As a spiritual leader of global stature, Francis certainly has the charisma to transform the situation. His visit has the potential to con-

sole and encourage Irish Catholics to take pride in their Church and their faith.

As one such Catholic, I am honoured to have any Pope visit this island. However, as a life-long Vatican observer, I am also acutely aware that there are many elements of Francis's pontificate which starkly conflict with his public image. There is, in other words, a side to Francis which dramatically contrasts with that simple man who first charmed the world five years ago.

I am not one of those who thinks that Francis ought to wear traditional papal regalia, or that he ought to live in the

Apostolic Palace rather than in a Vatican guest house.

I am moved by the sight of Peter's successor washing and kissing the feet of prisoners and refugees on Holy Thursday night. And, for a Church whose sins have often been as 'red as scarlet', the sight of the Holy Father on his knees confessing his faults, is something quite remarkable.

The Pope is, in other words, a potent symbol of what the Catholic Church ought to be: a place of tenderness and compassion for the widow, the orphan and the stranger; a place of mercy for those burdened by their conscience, and for those who require rest for their weary souls.

Francis's idea of the Church is one that is true to Christ's dictum: 'Whatever you do to the least of these my brothers, you do to me.'

In his global travels, the Pope goes to the margins to console

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**Criticism:
Francis has
faced flak
from both
traditional
and liberal
Catholics**



the lost and forgotten sheep. His denunciation of clericalism and priestly power, are a reminder that the clergy ought to model themselves on no one but Christ.

Moreover, his refusal to let diplomacy silence his demand for justice and peace, is exactly what one expects of a man who emulates the example of St Francis of Assisi.

However, the sad fact remains that, under Francis, the Catholic Church is on the verge of schism. In five short years, the Pope in conflict with many conservative Catholics and, as Mrs McAleese has made clear, a sizeable portion of liberal believers.

He has caused bitter divisions in the College of Cardinals and has been found wanting in relation to the clerical child abuse scandal. Even his most ardent supporters are beginning to acknowledge that his promised reforms are amounting to very little.

Vatican insiders regularly report that he can be prone to verbal outbursts, demands absolute loyalty

from his subordinates, and can be ruthless with his opponents. Last year, the Editor-in-Chief of The Catholic Herald, Damian Thompson, quoted a senior cleric who works in the Roman Curia, or the Papal government: 'Bergoglio divides the Church into those who are with him and those who are against him – and if he thinks you are in the latter camp then he'll come after you.' Indeed, some sources in Rome say the atmosphere has rarely been worse.

MORE worrying, however, is how the Pope has dealt with those senior cardinals who have challenged him on doctrine. In his 2016 document *Amoris Laetitia* – The Joy of Love – Francis suggests that divorced and re-married Catholics ought no longer to be barred from receiving Holy Communion, favouring, as he says, 'pastoral discernment of particular

cases'. To an outsider, this may sound like a trivial issue, but it has the potential to split the Church right down to the core.

Why has this issue caused so much turmoil?

Simply because many Catholics believe that Christ's directive on divorce could not be clearer: 'Anyone who divorces his wife for any cause other than unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery'.

Thus, in permitting divorced and re-married Catholics to receive Holy Communion, the Pope, they argue, is directly contravening the teachings of Christ and the Church.

Despite repeated calls for clarification on the matter, Francis has steadfastly refused to respond. Two of *Amoris Laetitia*'s most outspoken critics, Cardinals Raymond Burke and Gerhard Müller, were summarily removed from their high-profile positions in the Curia.

This has not stopped an international chorus of philosophers and

theologians from imploring the Pope to make a clear statement on the controversy. So far, the Pope has opted for silence.

The longer the row over *Amoris Laetitia* rumbles on, the more damaging it is to Francis and the Church. It is now widely believed that it may result in a schism.

Last year, for example, the Pope received a critical rebuke signed by more than 260 Catholic intellectuals and luminaries, including Research Fellow in the Philosophy faculty at Oxford University, Dr Joseph Shaw.

Nothing, however, has damaged the Pope's reputation more than the way he has mishandled the clerical abuse scandal.

For me, as for many Catholics, there is no greater stain on the Church's moral and spiritual character than this systemic crime.

As I have often written, it is a sin that cries out to Heaven, one for which there can be no mitigating excuse or justification.

To his credit, Francis established

the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors – a body comprising senior clerics and a group of lay people, including Irish abuse victim Marie Collins. Last year, however, Ms Collins resigned due to lack of progress in implementing the commission's recommendations. She was joined by three other lay leaders.

Then, only last month, the Pope enraged both supporters and detractors in publicly defending a Chilean bishop accused of child abuse. On a visit to Chile, he charged those calling for the removal of Bishop Juan Barros with 'slander', saying he would not remove the prelate until he saw clear evidence of his crimes.

It transpired that the widely-admired Capuchin monk, Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, handed the Pope a dossier on the issue in 2015.

Cardinal O'Malley, one of the Pope's closest advisers and someone widely tipped to succeed him, accused Francis of having 'abandoned' the victims.

Francis responded by apologising for the 'unintentional' hurt he had caused, and immediately dispatched a papal delegation to Chile to interview Bishop Barros and his accusers.

For many, this was too little, too late. Even his admirers were aghast at Francis's initial response to the pleas of the victims. Indeed, some are even going so far as asking how much longer his pontificate can survive.

FOR all that, Pope Francis continues to shine as a beacon of spiritual light for millions around the world. He is at his best when he goes out to the people, when he leaves behind Church governance and becomes a pastoral pope. Originally, he wanted to call himself 'Pope John XXIV' in honour of the 'Good Pope' Saint John XXIII. John, who called the Second Vatican Council shortly before his death in 1963, was universally loved for his humility and his passionate pleas for global peace.

Despite all his troubles, Francis touches people in a similar fashion. When he speaks on his favourite topic – the mercy of God – the world intently listens. His global authority stems from the fact that he understands the yearning of the human heart for peace, compassion and love.

We in Ireland should celebrate the fact that such a man of mercy will visit us in August. However, it would be a great tragedy if Francis were to leave the Church divided and at war.

It would be heartbreaking if he did not use the power of his popular papacy to finally cleanse it of what Benedict XVI called, 'the filth' inside its walls.

That is because the Pope who finally turns the page on that diabolical chapter in the Church's history, will be he who restores it to its true moral and spiritual mission.

It is said that, during a vision, St Francis of Assisi heard these words: 'Francis, Francis, go and repair My house which, as you can see is falling into ruins'. Five years after he first greeted the world as Pope Francis, Jorge Bergoglio is still struggling to repair and renew the Church.

Whether he can succeed will depend not only on his infectious charisma and zeal, but on his willingness to abandon the battles that cannot be won for those that must be.