

Derelict properties must be upgraded

AS the Government struggles to come up with a solution to an unprecedented housing crisis, it is absolutely astonishing, and totally indefensible, that so many vacant properties are dotted across Dublin. From the inner city to the suburbs, properties that could house families are boarded up awaiting refurbishment, in one case for decades.

The excuses given by the relevant local authorities are that some are awaiting demolition and redevelopment, while others cannot have the necessary remedial work performed because some tenants remain in those blocks of flats.

Little wonder, then, that Smithfield resident Geoffrey Fox was so passionate yesterday in confronting Finance Minister Paschal Donohoe, who was in the area to announce his running mate for the next election in the Dublin Central constituency. Mr Fox told how he, his wife and their son have lived in a cramped social housing two-bedroom flat for 16 years, and need a proper house, but he has been told he will wait another three years, despite there being derelict properties in the area.

Mr Donohoe protested that the Government was working as fast as it could to improve the situation, but how can he stand over that claim when perfectly reasonable houses and flats, already built, have not been made suitable for habitation? We have heard excuse after excuse for years now, and watched as targets have been announced and missed, and all the while, the numbers seeking accommodation rise rather than fall.

What once appeared mere incompetence now seems wilful and scandalous. The time for excuses is over. These homes need to be brought up to standard and into use as a matter of urgency.

Don't ignore Vicky

YESTERDAY, this newspaper outlined the reasons why presidential election candidate Liadh Ní Riada should announce whether or not she has consented to allowing her daughters have the HPV vaccine that prevents cervical cancer, having previously said she did not. Ms Ní Riada has stated that this would be an invasion of her daughters' privacy, but it was she who brought the girls into the argument when she raised fears about the vaccine in 2016.

Now Vicky Phelan, whose court case promoted exposure of the CervicalCheck scandal, has joined the call for the Sinn Féin MEP to clarify her position.

Ms Phelan was speaking out after Ms Ní Riada said in a radio debate on Thursday that she admired her bravery and that of Emma Mhic Mhathúna. The best way to illustrate that admiration would be to clear up any doubt about her opposition to having her daughters vaccinated, and show real solidarity with the women.

Liadh Ní Riada might feel that she will attract some sympathy by casually dismissing legitimate media enquiries as an invasion of privacy. She will gain no sympathy at all – indeed, quite the opposite – by ignoring this call for openness by Vicky Phelan, the moral fulcrum of the entire cervical cancer issue. She should put the issue beyond all doubt and answer a straightforward and entirely reasonable question with a simple yes or no.

Exam tally system

REBECCA Carter successfully went to the High Court to ensure she could start college on Monday, and we are delighted she will be studying veterinary science in UCD now that the mismatched exam script debacle has been remedied.

Notwithstanding the difficulty in marking so many exams in a short space of time, the State Examinations Commission must implement a system where, if a student has legitimate queries about a Leaving Cert points tally, these can be addressed in time for them, too, to start college.

A QUEST

It is the appalling struggle facing every Catholic in the country: how can you square your beliefs with the horrifying litany of child abuse by priests around the world? And for our writer it is harder still: he has to explain this to the beloved children he has brought up to believe in God and the Church...

LAST week, my family and I went to Sunday Mass in a neighbouring parish. It was a beautiful morning and the church was packed with people of all ages. But, as the priest began his homily, a sudden gloom fell across the congregation.

His topic was the recent appalling revelations of systemic clerical child abuse from America, Chile, Australia, Germany, Holland and, quite shockingly, Argentina where Pope Francis was Cardinal until his election to the papacy in 2013. Thousands of children were abused by thousands of Catholic clerics while the official Church apparently turned a blind eye. Mirroring our own bitter experience here in Ireland, it seems there was a widespread culture of abuse that stretched right across the globe.

The priest didn't pull his punches. 'The Devil', he said, had got right to the heart of the Church, had corrupted cardinals, bishops and priests. There was, he continued, no other way of explaining how such evil had managed to work its way into the Church's bloodstream. It wasn't simply that a few clerics had turned bad, but that countless thousands across the world had embraced the diabolical.

That is why, he concluded, the Irish Church must continue to implement its stringent child-protection policies. Children and vulnerable adults must always feel safe in every church, in every parish in Ireland. Nothing else would suffice.

IT was a powerful homily that made no excuses for evil. For me, as a parent, however, it was agony. Looking around at my boys, I could not help but ask what impact this would have on their faith and their beautiful innocence.

Our eldest is aged 13, has served Mass for six years, and has a deep and powerful faith. He is prayerful and profoundly sensitive. In everything, he tries his best to conform to Gospel values.

Our middle son is ten, and has only recently started serving Mass. Like his older brother, he has taken at face value what we have told him about his religion. He is blessed with a rare purity that shines through whenever we speak about God or the Church.

But, as we listened to that difficult homily, I could see the pain etched on their faces. Of course, our eldest is old and

SATURDAY ESSAY



by Mark Dooley

wise enough to know that there is a terrible problem in the Church. He has read my book *Why Be A Catholic?* in which I speak frankly about the Irish experience of clerical abuse. But no child, no matter how clued in, could possibly comprehend the scale and depravity of recent revelations. And how are parents supposed to explain why clerics – of all people – tortured, abused and violated those whom Christ cherished most? How can we possibly explain to our children why cardinals have resigned or have been removed, pending trial, for abusing their students or seminarians?

Before listening to that homily, I had never discussed such issues with my ten-year-old. For one thing, he loves his new role as altar server, and sees the Church as the pinnacle of moral perfection. It would be inconceivable to him that a priest could harm a child – any child.

It is, of course, a sign of the times that I must accompany my boys to the Church sacristy when they are serving at

Mass. Each of us must also sign a register as proof that the boys were in the presence of a guardian. Our eldest has questioned why we must do this, but his brother just takes it for granted.

It helps that we have a wonderful priest who lives and acts as all priests should. In fact, the first time our eldest realised that something awful had happened in the Irish Church was when, while serving Mass, he witnessed this priest break down on the altar. It had emerged that a deceased former parish priest had abused children and, even though he never knew that man, our priest felt obliged to apologise to the congregation. In so doing, his voice cracked, and he was forced to cut short his statement.

Our son was deeply moved by that episode, and, when he enquired what it all meant, we did our best to explain. As I did so, you could see him trying to compute what, to him, was the impossible. In that terrible moment, I knew that no child should have to confront

the fact that those they should be able to trust most have very often violated that sacred covenant.

But that is exactly what my little ten-year-old had to confront as he sat, last Sunday, listening to that priest discuss a crisis that has engulfed the global Church. He and our youngest boy, who is only seven, are so trusting, so innocent and so full of light. Each morning, as we set off for school, they pray aloud for a safe and happy day.

AND then, as they lay their little heads upon the pillow at night, they pray to their angels for a peaceful sleep.

It is something so lovely, so tender and innocent, but also something that we have worked hard to instil. As a family, we make room for sacred and prayerful times.

And, as parents, we endeavour to teach them the fundamentals of the faith in a way that renders them accessible and understandable. In other words, we have worked very hard to instil in our children sacred values.

This, despite the point that we are at odds with the surrounding secular culture. Everywhere they turn, they are

ON OF FAITH



Keeping the faith: Mark Dooley with his family

As a father who has sought to bring his children up as faithful Catholics, it was a moment of immense pain and sadness. I thought of Christ's beautiful words: 'Whoever receives a child such as this in My name, receives Me'. He told his disciples that unless they became like little children they could never enter the Kingdom. Yet, how often have their successors betrayed their divine mission by crucifying, instead of caring for, the 'little ones' whom He loved?

That priest last Sunday was right: something diabolical has happened to the Church. And yet as we discussed the issue over lunch I told my children that, despite all the apparent evil, there is still enormous good in the clergy and the Church. There are still many fine priests, such as the man who gave that powerful homily, and our own priest who was reduced to tears due to his predecessor's actions.

IN the wake of all the horror, they are the ones trying to pick up the pieces. They are ones quietly working in the service of the people, tending the sick and consoling the dying. They are the true face of a Church betrayed by so many but which has also produced true saints to guide the path of a stumbling humanity.

That they are only now becoming fully aware of the true extent of the abuse crisis proves how blessed my sons have been in having genuinely good priests – men who have been faithful to their vows, to their God and to the people they serve. That my little ten-year-old was so shocked by what he heard, shows that he has only witnessed the best of what the Church has to offer.

Still, I cannot but weep because my children have been exposed to things no child should ever have to hear. But, as I reminded them, popes and cardinals come and go, but the message never changes. That is why, as parents trying to raise our children in the faith, we must ultimately point beyond the clergy to the person of Christ. That is, after all, why the Church exists, and why so many persist in their faith despite the endless litany of disturbing revelations. It is why parents like us seek to immerse their children in the beauty of the sacramental way of life. Having received the gift of faith ourselves, we understand how it can transform a life.

At the end of our conversation, our eldest asked: 'These horrible things will stop, won't they, Dad?' I looked at his imploring eyes and thought of Christ's words: 'For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open.'

'Yes, I replied, they will stop now that everything is finally coming into the light.'

For the sake of all children growing up in the faith, as well as for their struggling parents, I can only pray that I am right.

challenged in their faith, and yet, somehow, they have managed to sustain it.

Ironically, the greatest threat to my children's faith comes from within the Church itself. My sons did not say anything about the priest's homily until we returned to the car after Mass.

Our eldest broke the silence: 'Why is this happening? The accusations about Pope Francis [that he allegedly protected child abusers in Argentina] aren't true, sure they're not?'

What do you say to such a question? I have written and spoken so often on this subject, and yet, when questioned by a child, I found myself lost for words. He was begging me for reassurance, but I could offer little. The point is that no-one knows where all this is going to end. Personally, I see it as

a great and necessary time of purification – a time when the 'filth', as Pope Benedict called it, is finally burnt away. However, what will be left of the Church after this period of purification is quite another question.

My ten-year-old finally spoke up: 'Why was the priest talking about the Devil and evil being in the Church?' As best I could, I sought to explain that some priests had done some very bad things and that it was now coming to light. 'How could they have done bad things? They're priests!'

And there it was, straight from the mouth of babes.

Like many parents, we see the Church as much more than the sum of its current trustees. It is not their Church, but Christ's Church – one that is firmly rooted in the Gospel. For us, the sacra-

ments are sacred treasures through which we experience the eternal in the midst of time.

But how are Catholic parents, however faithful, supposed to convince their children of this when the priesthood has, through the actions of clerical abusers, become so sullied and tarnished? How are parents supposed to fan the flames of faith in the next generation when even cardinals and bishops have disgraced their sacred vocation? How, in other words, are we supposed to explain away the hypocrisy of those who publicly proclaimed to be one thing, while privately being something very different?

Take, for example, the sacrament of confession. Some years ago, I confessed my sins to a priest who was subsequently dismissed from his parish for abusing two children.

I was deeply shocked by this because when Catholics go to confession, they do so on the basis that they are confessing to 'another Christ'. You trust that the priest lives the life to which he has been called.

Our eldest is devoted to this sacrament, believing in its power of mercy and forgiveness. Even at his tender age, it is, for him, a great source of consolation. My worry is that the current tsunami of shocking revelations will undermine the faith he has in confession.

We drove home in silence, but I could see that our ten-year-old was shaken. For him, the Church is everything that the world is not: beautiful, holy and beyond reproach. That children could be put at risk by those who serve the Church, is something that would wound him greatly.