



# Our unaccountable bishops undermine trust in Church

With revelations over Bishop John Magee's mishandling of abuse allegations, the Catholic Church has again sent out mixed messages about child protection. In a system where bishops are unaccountable, Catholic parents need to ask themselves some hard questions, says **Sean O'Conaill**

**"EVERYONE** is accountable," I insisted to the 15-year-old in front of me. Around 1994

'Brendan' had been carpeted for a serious assault on a pupil from a neighbouring school.

"But he called me an effing Fenian, sir!"

"He shouldn't have," I responded. "But you are responsible for what you do and must accept the consequences. That's called being accountable. Everyone has to be accountable. Everyone!"

Thankfully Brendan accepted the principle and the consequences, and so did his parents. School discipline, and the often delicate balance of relationships between schools, could not have been kept on any other basis.

I now realise, however, that Brendan could have upended my moral universe in this very Catholic school with a single sentence: "The bishop isn't accountable, sir."

By now any bright Catholic teenager anywhere could know this.

Since Bishop Eamon Casey's flight to the US in 1992 Ireland has seen a consistent flight from accountability by too many of its Catholic bishops.

From 309 AD bishops have known that a minority of priests sexually abuse children. Usually this causes horrific emotional and psychological injury. It results often in addiction, mental illness and even suicide.

In at least 25 countries in recent decades Catholic bishops knowingly exposed children to this danger, without warning to their parents.

Part of their defence is that they did not know of the awful consequences of abuse until informed of it by secular medicine (they never asked themselves why Jesus recommends summary drowning for those who scandalise children in all three synoptic Gospels).

Just before Christmas, Bishop John Magee of Cloyne admitted that despite all that has happened in Ireland since 1994, including the Ferns report, he was not observing his Church's own guidelines for safeguarding children.



■ **FAILURE TO COMPLY:** Bishop of Cloyne Dr John Magee has admitted that he failed to follow Church guidelines for safeguarding children against abuse by members of the clergy

"There is evidence [that Bishop Magee] did not faithfully report actual compliance with child protection procedures and the manner in which clerical sexual abuse allegations have been dealt with."

This was how the Republic's minister for children, Barry Andrews, described how an Irish bishop had misled him on the crucial issue of reporting allegations of criminal abuse to the police.

What explains this unparalleled slow learners' record by men who still lecture the world on sexual morality and spiritual health? There is no accounting for this either.

Australian bishop Geoffrey Robinson's request to the Pope for a Church-wide study of the abuse catastrophe in 2002 still goes unanswered.

Catholics still in denial may protest that bishops are accountable to the Pope and that he is handling this.

The Irish record proves otherwise. Abbot Kevin Smith, who gave free rein to the awful Brendan Smyth, was only forced to resign following a UTV

documentary in 1994.

Bishop Brendan Comiskey of Ferns fell only because of the BBC's *Suing the Pope* in 2002.

If anyone suffers consequences for any mishandling of abuse in the Dublin archdiocese, this will be entirely a result of the RTE documentary *Cardinal Sins* and the Irish state inquiry that it led to, now almost complete.

Rome has now apparently decided that although every Irish bishop is a papal appointee and although it must immediately discipline any Irish priest who concelebrates Mass with an Anglican priest, the papal nuncio in Ireland need not comment when a bishop endangers children and makes false declarations about this to a minister of state.

Meanwhile Catholic Bostonians are only too aware that the archbishop they forced to resign in 2002 for similar negligence – Bernard Cardinal Law – still sits on numerous Vatican committees, including the one that will appoint Bishop Magee's successor.

Austrian Catholics know that their appalling Cardinal Groer and Bishop Krenn were removed by Rome only after similar media 'outings'.

While Dublin's admirable Archbishop Diarmuid Martin rightly castigates those who buy illicit drugs for funding gang warfare in Irish cities, no Irish bishop has yet noted that the donations Catholics make to their Church have done less to protect their children from clerical predators than their state taxes and TV licence fees.

Or on the fact that with the Ferns report of 2005 final responsibility for the safety of Irish Catholic children in their own Church passed from Catholic bishops to the Irish state.

No bishop has to comment on anything he doesn't want to, because donations by Irish Catholics to their Church are entirely unconditional.

Not so in the secular world. Secular office holders too may dodge accountability but can usually be made accountable in time by the electoral principle.

No such principle now applies to

Catholic bishops (though it once did). They are absolute monarchs until aged 75, still enjoying what is historically a privilege of aristocracy rather than a gift of God – the right to give the worst possible example to those they presume to teach.

Often castigating 'cafeteria Catholicism', they don't notice when they dine a la carte themselves.

Brought up to speed on the effects of sexual abuse by secular psychology and badgered into adopting child protection measures by the Irish secular media, Irish Catholic bishops are now advised on how to defend Church assets against victim claims by secular lawyers and on how to deal with media disasters by secular PR experts.

Yet, asked to explain the impending loss of the weekday Mass to those who have made Mass donations all their lives, some answer – who could make this up? – "the advance of secularism".

For too many bishops the penny hasn't dropped yet that for at least the last 14 years the secular world has been far more effective in teaching a basic Christian principle – the principle of accountability – to Irish Catholic children than the Church has.

Our Church can survive every challenge except the loss of its integrity. The unaccountability of Catholic bishops has more deeply undermined the prestige of their office, and of the Church as an institution, than a hostile media ever could because it has corrupted too many bishops and almost bankrupted the trust and respect that all leadership must have.

It is morally and educationally outrageous.

So is the fact that Cardinal Brady and four other Irish bishops have expressed support for Bishop Magee remaining in office.

They need to ask themselves this: If they think it acceptable for a bishop to make a false declaration on matters of child safety, how on earth can anyone trust the declarations they themselves have made on the same matter?

Archbishop Martin has stated the key principle that will separate the Church of the future from the Church of the recent past.

"We have to have a system whereby people are pushed to be accountable. Human nature needs that," he said.

But where is the 'push' to come from? We Catholic parents need to ask ourselves if our unconditional financial support for our Church is not the root source of the corruption that prevents too many of our bishops from setting a Christian example to our children.

■ **Sean O'Conaill is acting coordinator of Voice of the Faithful Ireland. Voice of the Faithful says its mission is 'to provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the Faithful can actively participate in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church'. More information can be found at [www.votfi.com](http://www.votfi.com)**