

Church - a cold place for liberals



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Fr Kevin Hegarty reflects on Rome's investigation of Irish Church. For liberal Catholics, the Vatican - the Church as institution - is now a cold place.

The Vatican issued their summary of findings of their investigation of "Apostolic Visitation" into the Irish Church two weeks ago. It is very disappointing that all we've got is a summary. In the interests of transparency we should have the full report. That is especially important if decisions are made for the Irish Church on the back of what is in that report - I think those of us who are members of the Catholic community in Ireland have a right to know what is in it.

I think that the visitors were chosen on the basis of orthodoxy; they favoured a very conservative approach to church affairs. I am not so sure how comprehensive their visitation was - for example did

they get any real sense of how the laity think and feel, because they are generally in favour of reform in the church?

Many of us have come by honest and honourable reflection to seeing the need for change in the Church in terms of opening the ministry to both married men and women and *Humanae Vitae* is seen as utterly out of synch with the experience of married couples - we feel there is a necessity for change there - and also I do think myself that the Church's teaching in regard to homosexuality is very, very insensitive.

The Vatican Council promised an open and dialogical Church - that was the overall emphasis at that time; that seems to be particularly missing in the Catholic Church now. What we have seen especially in the last 30 years is a resiling from the reforms of the Vatican Council - and a conservative interpretation put on them.

I do believe myself that there is an ongoing debate within Catholicism which is reflected in the Irish Catholic community in regard to the future of the Church. But the Church in Ireland has failed to develop a pastoral strategy to resonate with the way that Ireland has changed over the years.

We only have one active seminary now - Maynooth - and there are very few seminarians there. It seems that what the visitators propose is a return to the strict regime that pertained before the Second Vatican Council - and that is reflected by the fact that the new doors have been erected by the seminary to protect it from the rest of the university. I think that is a retrograde step - because seminarians today are generally so rigidly pious and theologically conservative that I reckon they need regular exposure to secular reality - rather than incarceration in a spiritual ghetto - even if that is where some of them would prefer to be. The reality is that these seminarians, if they are ordained, will have to minister in a complex world rather than in an incense filled ghetto.

I think their analysis of why the Irish Church is in such difficulty is inadequate. They proceed from that to have a cut at liberal Catholics. They mentioned dissent from fundamental teachings - I think that is quite inaccurate. Fundamental teachings mean to me what we proclaim in the creed. The other areas where liberal Catholics would like to see change - such as married priests and women priests and a change in ban on contraception stated in *Humanae Vitae* - wouldn't strike me as fundamental teachings of the Church. The fundamental ones are centred on the divinity of Christ and the resurrection, so to say that Catholics dissent from fundamental teachings is very very unfair. For liberal Catholics, the Vatican - the Church as institution - is now a cold place.

Fr Kevin Hegarty is a leading member of Ireland's Association of Catholic Priests and has been in active ministry for 51 years.

Fr Kevin Hegarty - The Tablet