

Review: Irish Priests Name Their Truths

Reviewed Work(s): *Thirty-Three Good Men: Celibacy, Obedience and Identity — A Sociological Study of the Lived Experience of Irish Diocesan Priests in Modern Ireland, 1960-2010* by John A. Weafer

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Featured Review

Irish Priests Name Their Truths

Eugene Duffy

John Weafer has published a unique piece of research¹ in the Irish context, examining the personal lives of Irish diocesan priests. The work is ground-breaking in Ireland because so far we have had only historical accounts, personal biographies or statistical data about Irish diocesan priests and a minimal amount of information on the lived experiences of diocesan clergy. Those familiar with the work of the Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), based at Georgetown University, will be well aware that this kind of research has been going on there for more than fifty years in the United States, where it has been the basis for many important pastoral initiatives by the American bishops. So this current work, carried out by an independent researcher, who was one time the Director of the Irish Bishops' Council for Research and Development, is to be welcomed not just by sociologists and social commentators but above all by those working in the Church's ministry, especially priests, theologians and those with leadership roles. It is particularly timely in the context of the ecclesial initiatives and reforms being encouraged by Pope Francis. As was evident in the methodology pursued by the recent Synod of Bishops, the Pope is insistent that we take seriously the social realities amidst which we live and discern how we respond to these in the light of the Gospel. Weafer has provided a profound source for reflection on the life of Irish diocesan priests, across key areas of their lives and work. What he has presented here could be the basis for serious reflection and discernment by theologians, priests' councils and bishops over the next few years.

Apart from addressing a *lacuna* in the sociological research, Weafer admits to another reason for undertaking this research. At one time he had spent some years in the seminary and his research

¹**Thirty-Three Good Men: Celibacy, Obedience and Identity – A Sociological Study of the Lived Experience of Irish Diocesan Priests in Modern Ireland, 1960-2010.** John A. Weafer. Dublin: The Columba Press, 2013. Pp. 282. Price €14.99.

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has helped him to make sense of his own biography, although this was not his primary motivation in carrying out the study. More importantly, his own seminary experience gave him a significant advantage in the conduct of his survey: his background helped him 'to establish a rapport with the research participants and to bring an intuitive understanding to the planning of the study and analysis of the data' (p. 21). It is obvious that his familiarity with seminary life and his work with the Bishops' Conference provided him with a point of easy entry in his conversations with diocesan priests and also created a sense of trust that made it much easier for them to be more revealing of their life stories than if the researcher were from a less familiar background. Indeed, it is one of the amazing features of this study how ready priests seem to have been in telling their stories not least about their struggles with celibacy, sexuality and many aspects of magisterial teaching.

Weaver interviewed thirty-three priests or former priests, whom he divided into three categories: pre-Vatican II priests – those who were in seminary prior to or during the Council; Vatican II priests – those ordained in the 1970s and 1980s; post-Vatican II priests – those ordained in the 1990s and 2000s. This is a work of qualitative research, therefore it involved the participants sharing their stories with the researcher, with gentle probing along the way. This allows for a greater insight into the real life experiences of the priests concerned, and although the sample is small when compared with the more familiar quantitative surveys, it does facilitate the emergence of a profile of the Irish diocesan priest that is convincing and at times disturbing. As the sub-title of the book indicates, he interrogates the narratives under three main headings, namely, celibacy, obedience and identity.

The first section of the book begins with an overall picture of the Church in Ireland over the fifty years between 1960 and 2010 and how the priest's profile changed over that period. One detail from this is the accuracy with which the bishops' own Council for Research and Development was identifying trends in the Church in Ireland. In 1975 it noted that 'the Church was moving from its traditional position which "attempted a universal embrace of society to a situation where the Church has become a recognised institution alongside other major institutions of the cultural system"' (p.38). By 1985 it was noticing that young, urban, educated people were those most distanced from the Church, its beliefs and practices. There is little indication that the clergy were engaged in any reflection or pastoral planning in response to these trends although efforts were being made by some dioceses to put in place some pastoral plans, if not in an entirely systematic fashion. One is tempted to wonder if the data that was emerging had been

heeded and acted upon would the Church in Ireland today be in a healthier state. One is prompted to raise this question because once again significant data is being presented here that calls for a serious response on the part of priests and their bishops.

At the conclusion of this section, Weafer claims that the Church in Ireland is in crisis but that the priesthood is not. For him the crisis is not a crisis about the priesthood *per se*. Rather, he claims that the crisis is one of identity: do priests opt for a cultic model or servant-leader model of priesthood? This has led to a certain polarisation among clergy themselves, the first option being that of the younger clergy and the latter that of the older cohorts. Such polarisation will inevitably contribute to a lack of coherence in any pastoral planning that will be undertaken unless this reality is factored into the planning process itself in some fashion or other. Despite his thesis that the priesthood is not in crisis, it is hard not to suspect that there are serious problems relating to priesthood in Ireland today, apart from the demographics of those in priestly ministry, there is, as will emerge later, a significant discrepancy between what priests agree with in Church teaching and practice and how they apply these in their ministry.

The second section of the book is taken up with the narratives of the priests and the author's analysis of the material under his three main headings: celibacy, obedience and identity. One is struck by the frankness with which priests spoke about their struggles with sexuality and celibacy and the information elicited merits serious consideration. Weafer describes the experience of celibacy as a continuum 'ranging from complete acceptance to total rejection, with most priests in the middle' (p.129). The study also reveals a significant number of priests who are sexually active, whether with heterosexual or homosexual partners, often it would seem with the knowledge of their bishops. The majority of priests disagree with the Church's imposition of mandatory celibacy on diocesan priests while some, especially younger priests, see its positive value as a privilege and a 'freely chosen duty that helps to define their identity as priests for themselves and others' (p.128).

Despite the fact that celibacy is such a significant aspect of the priest's life, it is one of the issues for which priests are not well prepared in their formation. Certainly this is evident from the two older cohorts in this study. For many of them celibacy contributes to a sense of emotional isolation and loneliness which is an issue that has been well highlighted by Marie Keenan (*Child Sexual Abuse & the Catholic Church*), who showed how emotional privation can be a significant contributory factor in the case of clergy who have been found guilty of sexual abuse. This finding raises serious questions about the support systems that are in place

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for priests. Furthermore, the fact that such a significant number of priests disagree with the rule of mandatory celibacy is an issue that warrants serious consideration by the Church's magisterium. It is now almost fifty years since it was last addressed in a systematic way by Paul VI, when he stated his intention as giving 'new lustre and strength to priestly celibacy in the world of today'. Pope Francis has suggested to those who have raised the question of mandatory celibacy that if bishops' conferences present the issue it can be discussed. On the question of obedience, as with celibacy, there are greater similarities in the two older cohorts than there are between them and the younger cohort. The older priests tend to take a rather pragmatic approach to the demands of their bishops and other Church authorities. Very few will publicly voice their opposition to Church teaching or diocesan policies, but at a private level they feel free to do so or to devise pastoral solutions to individual problems as they arise. So, for example, few of them will voice opposition to *Humanae Vitae* yet in the confessional or in a counselling situation they will take a more liberal approach in addressing the issue. Similarly in their ministry to those in second unions who may want a blessing for their marriages or to receive Communion, a pastoral solution is found that may not be in total conformity with Church regulations. Weafer describes these priests as 'company men with attitude'. The approach seems to be that if one does not confront the bishop or other authorities directly then there is no conflict and the incongruities can be managed.

The younger cohort have a different attitude to obedience: 'they are unquestionably loyal to their leaders' (p.169). Their stated understanding of obedience is more ideological and theologically conservative than that of their elders. Many of them were as critical of the seminary authorities as their elders but for different reasons. The older cohorts regarded the seminary regime as being too strict and obsessed with rules, while many of the post-Vatican II priests regarded the seminary staff as too liberal. 'Some of these students felt victimised by the college authorities "for standing up for their faith"' (p.170). Despite their ideological acceptance of Church authority, younger priests are as pragmatic as the older groups and 'willing to address the needs of people rather than automatically imposing Church law. ... However, they are not always subservient and they have learnt to circumvent the rules and "do their own thing" from time to time' (pp.175 -176).

In the course of his exploration of obedience, Weafer heard the story of two priests, one from each of the older cohorts, who had been falsely accused of child sexual abuse. Both are very moving testimonies. One is left wondering about the structures for dealing with persons accused of this crime. There was certainly a serious

failure in the past to listen sympathetically to the victims. Is there not a need also to listen to the accused too, and even more, in the light of these testimonies, is there not an issue of justice to be addressed in the way in which the suspect is publicly named and shamed before the veracity of the accusation has been established? What of the presumption of innocence until proven guilty? Both men in these stories showed remarkable fortitude, forbearance and magnanimity in their obedience to Church authorities.

In the penultimate chapter, Weafer looks at how priests understand priesthood in terms of vocation, ontological status, attitudes towards the magisterium, liturgy and devotion, theological perspectives and attitudes towards celibacy. He concludes, consistent with other researchers from the United States, that there are distinct generations of priests in the Church in Ireland with diverse values, beliefs and understandings of priesthood. The oldest group began with a rather cultic approach, which over the years merged with the servant-leader model of the Vatican group, while the youngest group are characterised as 'neo-orthodox', focusing more on the sacramental dimension of priesthood and traditional Church practices that give them a greater sense of certainty in an uncertain world. Overall, this is a most informative piece of research and shows the complexity of the diocesan priesthood in Ireland at this time. It shows clearly the many incongruities that exist between rhetoric and practice in the Church. It gives a clear insight into the real life struggles of many priests as they negotiate the balance between personal beliefs and public proclamation, between respect for the Church structures and the complex human problems that arise in their parishes. Most of all, it shows that Irish priests across all age groups have a strong sense of their identity and mission. It is to be warmly recommended to all who are interested in the priesthood in Ireland today.