

"The Irish Spring"
 Week of October 10, 2011
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

The newspapers and television reports have been filled these past few months with references to the so-called Arab Spring, focusing on dramatic developments in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and so many other countries in the Arab world.

There has been a comparable development in the Catholic world as well. One could refer to it as the Irish Spring, even though it didn't go into high gear until the summer and early fall.

The Sunday *New York Times* on September 18th of this year did a two-page story on developments in Ireland entitled, "A Rupture of Reverence for the Vatican Sets Off a Transformation in Ireland."

The opening salvo was fired by the prime minister Enda Kenny, a practicing Catholic, who unexpectedly took the floor of the Irish Parliament this summer to openly criticize the Church, and specifically the Vatican, for its presumption to place canon law above civil law in matters affecting sexual abuse by priests and religious.

A country where 87 percent of the population identifies itself as Catholic and where the Church runs more than 90 percent of the nation's primary schools is in the throes of a major transformation—from one of "awe, respect, and fear" of the Vatican to something approaching "rage, disgust, and defiance."

This transformation is the result of "a long series of horrific revelations about decades of abuse of children entrusted to the church's care by a reverential populace."

While Ireland isn't the only Catholic country where the Vatican's image has been tarnished, nowhere have developments "shaken a whole society so thoroughly or so intensively as in Ireland."

"For the first time in Ireland," the prime minister declared, "a report into child sexual abuse exposed an attempt by the Holy See to frustrate an inquiry into a sovereign, democratic republic as little as three years ago, not three decades ago."

Prime Minister Kenny was referring to the so-called Cloyne report, named after the diocese in question, which detailed abuse and cover-ups by church officials in southern Ireland through 2009. The bishop of Cloyne, a former secretary to popes, has since resigned.

Charging that the Vatican had encouraged bishops to ignore child-protection guidelines which the Irish bishops themselves had adopted, the prime minister attacked "the dysfunction, the disconnection, the elitism that dominate the culture of the Vatican."

"The rape and torture of children were downplayed, or 'managed' to uphold instead the primacy of the institution—its power, its standing and its reputation [an all-too-familiar charge]." Instead of listening with humility to the heartbreaking evidence of "humiliation and betrayal," the prime minister continued, "the Vatican's response was to parse and analyze it with the gimlet eye of a canon lawyer."

"It was a seminal moment," wrote a correspondent for *The Irish Times*. "No Irish prime minister has ever talked to the Catholic Church before in this fashion. The obsequiousness of the Irish state toward the Vatican is gone. The deference is gone."

According to *The New York Times*, the prime minister's declaration "deeply angered" the Vatican. It immediately withdrew its ambassador from Dublin, who was reassigned to the Czech Republic. The position remains vacant to this day, and there has even been talk of merging the ambassadorship to Ireland with that of Italy.

However, the prime minister enjoys widespread support within Ireland itself. Again, according to *The New York Times*, the Irish people feel "doubly betrayed: first by the abuse itself, and second by what many see as a cover-up by the church, compounded by the often opaque, legalistic language with which it defends itself."

As noted above, this is an all-too-familiar feeling in the United States. And so, too, is the sharp decrease in church attendance. The archbishop of Dublin estimates that only 18 percent of Catholics in his archdiocese attended Mass every week.

Eamon Gilmore, Ireland's deputy prime minister, said that the Church would no longer enjoy its previous privileges and powers as in times past, when the Church, with the government's collusion, "effectively dictated the social policy of the state."

When it comes to protecting children, Mr. Gilmore said, "Everybody in the state—irrespective of whether they're ordinary citizens doing everyday work, or a priest or a bishop—has to comply with the law."

A "transformation," indeed.

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"Labor Day, 2011 – II"
 Week of October 17, 2011
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

In my Labor Day column for this year I chided the U.S. Catholic bishops for two reasons: for failing to apply Catholic social teaching to the issue of justice in the Church itself, and for failing to defend the right of workers to form labor unions and to engage in collective bargaining, especially in such states as Wisconsin, Ohio, and elsewhere.

I always hear from one or two politically conservative readers in Wisconsin defending the initiatives of Governor Scott Walker and the Republican legislature, but no one ever challenges me on connecting Catholic social teaching with the matter of justice in the Church. Perhaps the principle of sacramentality, on which my argument is based, is too abstract for them.

The bishops did issue a Labor Day statement through the chairman of their U.S. Bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, Bishop Stephen E. Blair of Stockton, California, one of the best bishops in the Conference.

Bishop Blair, like his predecessors, did not touch the connection between Catholic social teaching and justice in the Church, but he did defend the right of workers to form unions in both the public and private sectors, and to bargain collectively in each sector.

Bishop Blair pointed out that "Beginning in *Rerum Novarum*, the church has consistently supported efforts of workers to join together to defend their rights and protect their dignity. Pope Leo XIII taught that the right of workers to choose to join a union was based on a natural right and that it was the government's obligation to protect that right rather than undermine it (*Rerum Novarum*, 51)."

This teaching, Bishop Blair noted, has been affirmed consistently by Leo XIII's successors. Thus, Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical 1981 *Laborem Exercens* ("On Doing Work") declared that unions "are an indispensable element of social life, especially in modern industrialized societies (No. 20)."

More recently still, Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* ("Charity in Truth") insisted that "The repeated calls issued within the church's social doctrine, beginning with *Rerum Novarum*, for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights must therefore be honored today even more than in the past" (No. 25)."

Perhaps these papal teachings can be written off as "naive," as one of my correspondents did in effect, but then papal teachings on human sexuality and reproduction can similarly be dismissed.

Bishop Blair stumbled, in good faith to be sure, when he insisted that "Bishops in Wisconsin, Ohio and elsewhere have faithfully and carefully outlined Catholic teaching on worker rights, suggesting that difficult times should not lead us to ignore the legitimate rights of workers."

Over against Governor Walker and his supporters, Bishop Blair wrote that "the church affirms the rights of workers *in public and private employment* to choose to come together to form and join unions, *to bargain collectively* and to have an effective voice in the workplace" (my italics).

The bishops of Wisconsin, speaking through the archbishop of Milwaukee, Jerome Listeki, were never so specific as Bishop Blair has been. And I am not aware of any statement by the Ohio bishops, that was critical of Governor John Kasich and the Republican legislature, both of which denied collective bargaining rights to public service employees.

On the other hand, Bishop Blair's Labor Day statement is not completely one-sided in favor of labor unions. He makes clear that "This does not mean every outcome of bargaining is responsible or that all actions of particular unions—or for that matter employers—merit support. Unions, like other human institutions, can be misused or can abuse their role."

He even concedes that "unions in some places have taken public positions that the church cannot support, that many union members may not support and that have little to do with work or workers' rights." However, he does not give any examples.

At the same time, Bishop Blair continues, "The teaching that workers have the right to choose freely to form and belong to unions and other associations without interference or intimidation is strong and consistent."

This is a fine statement, even though it doesn't touch upon the principle of sacramentality and the Church's obligation to practice what it preaches. Would that all the bishops in the Conference could sign on to it, especially the parts that were highlighted in this week's column.

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