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## Prologue

It is high noon near Dublin's Heuston Station and I've paused to take in the scene. The low, grey summer sky promises drizzle any minute. From all directions, the trickle of papal Mass-goers is turning into a flood. The last time people marched this way for a Pope, the quays of the River Liffey were in what seemed like terminal decline – the once proud red-brick houses lined the river like broken-down teeth with shattered window cavities; half-demolished brick piles held together by braces, and gaps filled with scrub and rubbish.

Waiting on the footpath, I survey the Dublin I see before me, and consider how utterly it has changed from the city that was once my hometown. The ruins are renovated and, at ground level, occupied with shops that signal the new prosperity. When Irish people celebrate the breaking of bread today, it is more likely to be sourdough and produced by tattooed hipsters in faux artisanal bakeries than silent nuns in convents. Passion is the word used to sell Ireland's new holy water – coffee – rather than to remind the faithful that Jesus Christ died on the cross for the salvation of their souls. The decrepit old Strumpet City is cleaned up and is now a playground of nail bars, tanning salons, cupcakes and CrossFit.

Once Dublin streets echoed with street-trader voices, like a profane Gregorian chant – '*Pears – foive-for-feeefy. Herdled or Press.*' I never noticed the chorus had vanished until hearing it again – the voices back for one day only. '*Pope Fraaancis posters, plaques and scaaaarves.*' But business is as slack as the papal flags, hanging limp in the heavy air. Many of the Mass-goers learned their lesson at a concert for the Pope in Croke Park the night before, when flags they bought on the way in were confiscated moments later because the plastic flagpoles posed a security risk. In Ireland's twenty-first-century Rock-Scissors-Paper game of belief systems, Health and Safety always wins.

Health and Safety has also imposed a huge security cordon outside the already sprawling Phoenix Park and people are converging

having walked for up to eight kilometres to get here. Over 250,000 tickets have been distributed for the Mass, a quarter of the number that attended in 1979. Those who attended the 1979 Mass tell me it felt like a triumph. In retrospect, it was a final dip in a font of holy water before the water evaporated, leaving a residue of filth in its wake. While this 2018 Mass is a comfort to some, for many in Ireland that it's happening at all is a provocation.

With my mind wandering idly, it takes a moment to take in fully the approaching anachronism – a nun in full habit who looks about my age. Sr Deirdre Tymon tells me she is originally from Roscommon but lives and works as a Carmelite in a home for the aged and infirm in Germantown, upstate New York. She has five nieces with her, tweens and teens, all with long reddish hair, freckles and in leggings. They are taking a break, too, before the uphill march through the Parkgate Street entrance to the park.

Sr Deirdre has been in the US for twenty years and is back especially for the papal Mass. Swirling in my head is a list of questions and issues I'd like to put to her but I am here today as an observer, I tell myself, not a journalist on a deadline to file a 'colour' piece. No leading questions, I decide, just open ones.

Now that she's back, what does she make now of the mood?

'There's a real anger,' she says. The anger comes from a continued failure by Ireland's Catholic Church to address fully the clerical child sexual abuse scandal, she says. Neighbours in Co. Roscommon who used to be very pious are now 'giving out yards' about the Church. The abuse, the cover-ups, the state collusion, the apologies, the pain, the wasted lives, the broken families. In sum: the agony of grappling today with what was once Catholic Ireland. Then, without a moment's hesitation, or any leading questions from me, something pours out of this young Sister that she has clearly been reflecting on for some time.

'There is anger,' she repeats, 'but I sense it is an old anger.' Some of the anger directed outward, she thinks, is from people who are unable to rid themselves of an inner rage that has been building in themselves at something inherited from Famine or Penal times, or perhaps even earlier.

'People put the priests and bishops on a pedestal and they are angry

now at themselves for doing it,' she says. 'The current younger generation is taking them down but the anger at the past remains.'

But when I look at the crowd passing me – papal Mass-goers and apathetic Dubliners out for some Sunday shopping – no one looks angry. Can you be both angry and apathetic? I wonder. Or angry yet calm? On my way here this morning I have been struck many times by the easy, gentle demeanour of the Mass-going crowd. I felt it when crammed into the Luas tram and as we glided, without a murmur of protest or a sharp remark or elbow, through the city centre to today's last stop, Smithfield. The driver, aware of the trudge down the quays ahead of us, told the passengers apologetically, 'I can get you no closer to the Pope.' Everyone chuckled as they disembarked. Like the sing-song voices of the street traders, this softer spirit is part of the atmosphere of my childhood, something that I didn't notice disappearing.

These people remind me of a quieter Ireland that no longer exists. Like Sr Deirdre, I have been out of the country for two decades. The Ireland I return to is a second home now. A place of good chats, bad organization and gentle social control that I can handle for about a week, no problem. It has taken twenty years but I no longer have strong feelings about the place. It just is the way it is, and I decided it wasn't for me.

I still have very mixed feelings towards the Irish Catholic Church, but I'm no longer angry with it. That has taken a while, too. It is as it is, in seemingly terminal decline, and I have the luxury, living in Berlin, of not being exposed to it every day. I didn't have to get children baptized just to get them into a local school. Away from the daily reality of life in Ireland, and its Church, I am what you would call a grappling Catholic: unsure of church doctrine and uneasy about its effect on my life, yet better able now to appreciate the beauty, and see how many of the toxic elements I remember were as much Irish as Catholic.

As Sr Deirdre steers her nieces off towards the park, a new announcement comes over the loud speakers. With ninety minutes to Mass-time, the colour-coded routing system imposed by Health and Safety has been abandoned. Anyone can enter by any gate, regardless of their ticket. I laugh at the mild anxiety I was feeling about being turned away from the most convenient – red – entrance though I

hold a green ticket. The years in Germany, where systems are imposed and must be obeyed regardless of need or common sense, have left their mark. In contrast, Ireland likes to devise systems and rules that are rarely enforced, or so flawed they are abandoned when the collective embarrassment or chaos outweighs the collective value.

And yet these deep deposits of common sense and pragmatism in our national DNA didn't prevent the Catholic Church from being able to dominate this land completely and absolutely for most of the twentieth century. Why, I wonder, did we, as a nation, let it? How did the Church establish and consolidate power with its rules and systems? Were we browbeaten into obedience, in all places, at all times, as a modern narrative goes? Or did we accommodate ourselves with it because, often, it suited us? Was our unquestioning deference to the bishop a Catholic thing or a part of our inherited colonial deference to power? Even in the modern age, by which time humans had learned to split the atom and splice DNA, why was it impossible for so long to separate the Catholic and Irish elements of our identity?

Heading into the Phoenix Park, it occurs to me that I could be on holiday in the Alps, reading a mindless thriller with a pot of tea. But instead I am here among the crowd of papal extras asking myself impossible questions. Trudging forward, under a purple sky worthy of a Cecil B. DeMille biblical epic, I feel a storm brewing.

Walking through the park I look left and right, wondering where Tony Walsh had his hideaway here for abusing boys. In journalist Mary Raftery's explosive 2002 television documentary *Cardinal Secrets*, Darren McGavin recalled the priest bringing him to this park on his ninth birthday and pushing him over on to his stomach.

'He just went straight into me and he just kept going . . . for fucking ever,' he said, recalling how the priest wiped his bottom with a purple sash and brought him home.

Catching sight of the looming steel cross, a souvenir of the 1979 papal Mass in the park, I wonder how many gathering here accept that the legacy of abuse – of children, of power – is as much a part of our country's history as the 35-metre-high cross.

At a time like this, perhaps distance is the most potent form of protest. The story of this papal visit will not be how many came to the

events, but how many stayed away. The previous day, walking through the city centre, I noticed a modest crowd gathered behind barriers on O'Connell Street to wave at the passing Pope on his arrival. I walked northwards, along the east side of Parnell Square and on to North Frederick Street where a man was dancing in a spontaneous pavement protest. Blaring from speakers in his van was Australian singer Tim Minchin's explicit 'Pope Song' about allegations that Pope Benedict XVI helped cover up abuse claims during his predecessor's time as Pope. After angry references to apostates and papists, the man is now bouncing around to Minchin's lyrics that, if the Pope covered up child abuse, he's as bad as the paedophile priest.

On Parnell Square, at the Garden of Remembrance, a protest has been called in parallel to the Phoenix Park Mass. Around 5,000 people hold cards reading 'Truth, Justice, Love'. Performance poet Sarah Clancy reads:

Cherish the shame they implanted in whole generations.  
Cherish the suicides – collateral damage in an otherwise virtuous struggle.  
Cherish the ring-kissers who made it all possible . . .

There were lots of ring-kissers then, even in my own profession. From my bag I dig out the reissue of the September 1979 edition of the *Sunday Independent* that covered Pope John Paul's visit – reproduced nearly thirty-nine years later to mark this second papal visit – and read a headline with a now ambiguous papal exclamation: "I am expressing my sense of what Ireland deserves."

'He came to us yesterday from the east across the river of time,' an unnamed reporter wrote, 'the son of Poland held out his arms for the embrace of Mother Ireland and she grasped him to her bosom as if welcoming home a long lost child.' As I read on, wearing my professional hat, I can't decide if it would be better if the reporter believed what he was writing, or didn't believe it but wrote it to capture the public mood. When I ask people who were present in 1979, many admit feeling part of an elated collective – a memory that some would now prefer to forget.

I have the perfect excuse for my absence in 1979: I was in the terrible twos and, from what I hear, a potential danger to the public. Had I been covering the event back then, though, I can easily imagine



myself writing copy to capture the mood as I gauged it – while quietly seething at the social pressure to be present and enthused. Had I been there privately, maybe I would have cheered along like everyone else.

Even if the crowd knew we were not as we presented ourselves to the Polish Pope in 1979, perhaps we liked being seen as he apparently chose to see us? How would I feel now, I wonder, if I saw my face in a still image of the largest mass gatherings in Irish history – a local version of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of Will*, captured in bright John Hinde colours?

I meet a shop-owner acquaintance who stayed as far away from Pope Francis as he did from his Polish predecessor. However, unlike in 1979, when strangers came in to berate him for keeping his shop open, business was brisk during the 2018 Mass. 'I wonder,' he says, laughing, 'how many of those who went along in 1979 are acting as moral arbiters of those who choose to go now?'

Saturday evening. Pope Francis has been in Dublin for about eight hours as I take my place in the Cusack Stand in Dublin's Croke Park. I'm at the Festival of Families, a concert to mark the Pope's arrival at the 2018 World Meeting of Families (WMOF). This second-ever visit of a Pope to Ireland has none of the significance of the first. Pope John Paul II's visit was staged as a triumphalist celebration of Irish spiritual exceptionalism. This visit is turning out to be more of an attestation of Irish spiritual indifference. Apart from those who have bothered to get out and protest, that is – those angry about the Church's abuse legacy, its treatment of women, and the WMOF organizers' views of family that, in their eyes, excludes those who identify as LGBTI.

Still, many Irish Catholics have embraced the five-day WMOF event as a chance to take stock and meet like-minded people in what many find an increasingly hostile atmosphere. 'Practising Catholics in Ireland are a minority now,' says Ann from Mayo, sitting between me and her nodding husband. I watch them watching the evening, drawing comfort from its messages about the value of faith and traditional families in times of crisis. They hold hands when Andrea Bocelli sings 'Nessun Dorma' and 'Ave Maria'.

Their first big cheer of the evening, with the rest of the crowd of 80,000, is to greet Pope Francis into the stadium as actor Patrick Bergin sings Leonard Cohen's 'Anthem'. After a slow circuit in his Popemobile, the Pope settles onstage. He seems slightly distracted – perhaps dazed from his ninety-minute meeting with clerical abuse survivors which ended barely an hour before his arrival here.

There are prayers, more songs and videos of traditional families discussing Catholic faith in their lives. But the final, loudest cheer of the evening is for a stirring performance of *Riverdance*. As the professional dancers onstage build to the finale, they are joined by hundreds of amateurs lining the pitch perimeter. The footwork, logistics and stage craft delight the audience. As the evening air turns chilly, they wrap themselves gladly in its cultural comfort blanket.

I leave my seat and battle through the nostalgic haze, looking for the exit, thinking of how much Ireland has changed since *Riverdance* first exploded. Back then, it was sold to us as Irish dance rediscovering its mojo, the looseness and vitality it had before killjoy Catholic bishops imposed stiff bodies and arms to avoid 'occasions of sin'. A quarter of a century later, looking back, *Riverdance* seems more like a last jig at the Catholic crossroads. A few months before *Riverdance*'s premiere in Dublin, as the interval act at the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest, Fr Brendan Smyth of the Norbertine order was charged with a range of child sexual abuse offences in Northern Ireland; by the end of that year, delays over his extradition to the North contributed to the collapse of the government in Dublin. And exactly a year after the *Riverdance* spectacle, in April 1995, Andrew Madden became the first victim of clerical child sexual abuse to go public in Ireland. Neither Ireland nor the Catholic Church were ever the same again.

The following afternoon in the Phoenix Park, I have lots to contend with: Mass-goers around me, drizzle above me and Daniel O'Donnell's voice within me. As Catholic Ireland's favourite crooner finishes his set under the papal cross, I try to shake off the raindrops – and my continuing feeling of ambivalence.

The sky is leaden with cloud but the crowd is bright with chatter. What's striking is how so many conversations – without any prompting from me – drift to the abuse legacy. A woman from Sutton, near

where I grew up, tells me in a matter-of-fact voice how she often had Fr Ivan Payne, a notorious offender (Andrew Madden's abuser), at her kitchen table. When I ask her how she feels about that now, she falls silent.

Things are about to get going but even judging from ground level, it's a low turnout. Later it is estimated at just 150,000, down 85 per cent on the 1979 numbers. The largest group in Ireland today is clearly the stay-at-homes.

For me, the 2018 papal Mass is a sombre affair. In his opening words, Archbishop of Dublin Diarmuid Martin speaks of Ireland's fragile faith and the 'hope of a spring for the Irish Church . . . that does not wish to cover up the harshness of dark days'.

That prompts the most memorable moment, when Pope Francis departs from the usual opening liturgy to read a handwritten note. It is his personal, unparsed response to his meeting with clerical abuse survivors the previous day. Having listened to their stories individually, he described abusing clergy and religious as 'filth'. Improvising in the Phoenix Park, he turns the Penitential Act of the Mass back on the Church itself. Instead of asking the crowd to reflect on their sins, he asks for the Church to be forgiven: for abuses of power, abuse of conscience, sexual abuses and religious who looked away. But few notice what he's doing.

In conclusion, Francis heeds the advice given to him the day before by Clodagh Malone, a woman born in a mother and baby home and adopted at ten weeks: he asks forgiveness for 'all the times single mothers had been told that to seek their children, whom they had been separated from, was a mortal sin, and sons and daughters who were told the same'.

'This is not a mortal sin,' he says, to rising applause.

For younger ears it is an anachronistic aside but for older listeners, in particular women separated from their newborn children, it is hugely important. Many survivors say afterwards hearing these words from the Pope is a huge relief. I find myself wondering why it has taken so long – and an Argentinian Pope, a self-described 'man from the end of the earth' – to say what these damaged people needed to hear? After years of apologies, genuine and qualified, what prevented Irish bishops from making this apology?

It gets to Communion and I watch as dozens of old white men in white vestments and cellophane rain ponchos parade through the crowd in columns to distribute the host. I've seen enough and leave. It feels like a requiem – and I hate being anywhere at the end.

Catholic Ireland – adjective and noun – shaped us as a people more than we will ever know. In the last twenty-five rancorous years of scandals – pursuing overdue justice for victims and survivors of abusive clerics and religious – there has been little time or capacity to reflect on the trauma that remains.

One ascendant camp of Irish society rejoices at Catholic Ireland's slide; the other camp, once in the majority, mourns its decline. Between these camps, though, I see many silent people, as bewildered by the fall as the rise. When I ask these people about the recent past, I hear what sounds like the same uneasy silence that's in my own mind. Something about this past is gnawing at me. Despite full exposure, as a member of the last generation to have a full Irish Catholic childhood, I have a very shaky grasp on Roman Catholicism. I feel too young to grasp the sorrowful mystery that was Catholic Ireland, or carry any significant scars, yet old enough to feel its lingering effects.

Two decades living in Germany has given me distance – and an idea. I wonder would it be possible to apply to our Irish Catholic story some principles of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – the process of coming to terms with the past? The basic rule underlying that tongue-twister of a word was learned the hard way by Germany in the last century: you cannot be blamed for a past beyond your reach, but that does not absolve you of responsibility to try and understand it, either. I want to understand how my Catholic past went from rigid reality to vanishing act – now you see it, now you don't. To do that, though, I need to understand how Catholic Ireland rose to glory and shrivelled up in shame. Until I do that, I cannot have a proper parting.



PART ONE

# The Leaning Tower of Piety



## I. The feathers of scandal

'Beneath the trees where nobody sees  
They'll hide and seek as long as they please . . .'

Jimmy Kennedy and John W. Bratton, 'The Teddy Bears' Picnic'

Dead leaves follow me through Edenmore, the wind carrying them on a final, scratchy dance. It's a cold January day and, somewhere nearby, I hear the ice-cream truck on an optimistic round, kerb-crawling for trade. The warbling melody takes me back thirty years, echoing through Edenmore, winter or summer. The tune's pitch, I always noticed, is distorted by wind and motion – and now by memory. I've always disliked 'The Teddy Bears' Picnic', particularly the creepy lyrics by Omagh native Jimmy Kennedy. In hindsight, I hate it even more.

If you go down in the woods today  
You're sure of a big surprise  
If you go down in the woods today  
You'd better go in disguise!

I pass my old primary school St Malachy's, a three-storey concrete bunker. Opposite is St Eithne's Girls' School and the local pub, The Concorde, which has now outlived its grander, aircraft namesake by twenty years. It occurs to me that I've never been inside, reminding me how I have always felt a sense of belonging and not belonging to this place.

I was raised, one of five children, in an in-between place. Our family home was built on the outskirts of Raheny, a suburban village on the north side of Dublin. Our street of private houses was built around the corner from the Dublin Corporation's 1960s housing development named Edenmore. At St Malachy's in Edenmore, I sat



alongside boys from the corporation houses. I didn't really fit in. I was bookish, not sporty. I liked serving at Mass. I didn't understand the rules of the street as they did. The Edenmore boys and I never quite clicked. The class question was there, but unspoken.

My tenuous sense of connection to Edenmore has lessened further after two decades away. And yet here I am, walking streets that have always been both familiar and strange: Edenmore Avenue, Edenmore Drive, Edenmore Gardens . . . almost 1,000 plain houses with pebble-dash facades.

I keep walking and thinking. I pass a shrine to Our Lady for victims of the 1981 nightclub fire that killed forty-eight people, and then enter a park that was once a landfill site. The grass here gets waterlogged when it rains heavily. Who knows what's under there? I always meant to ask more.

There is a lot buried in Edenmore that I have always meant to ask about. Above all, the unfinished business of our past. When I raise it, people say it's ancient history or didn't affect them. Sometimes I sense a gap between the awful facts they mention in passing and their matter-of-fact tone. Something happened here that didn't affect people. Or it did affect them and they're not interested, not able or not willing to talk. I'm here to give it a final go.

St Monica's Church is an elongated prism of brick, glass and tile that once had seven weekend Masses and full pews. But in the late 1990s, things flipped from religious parish to secular neighbourhood. Today the church capacity has been reduced, and still the three weekend Masses are half-empty, attended mainly by older people who won't be here in ten or twenty years' time. Attendance is dropping so fast that, at some Masses, the brass memorial plaques on the pews outnumber the attendees. People come and go, as much out of habit and social outlet as faith. Even Christmas Mass two weeks previously was a dispiriting affair: a sparse crowd, fluorescent lights that cast a curious green glow, a three-sentence sermon.

As I gaze at the building, I'm wondering why the slump here happened so fast, and with so little fuss. And will anything be left here in twenty years' time? Does anyone here care? Before this part of my past dies, I would like to know what finished it off. Not to apportion blame or pronounce sentence, just to understand.

St Monica's was only supposed to be a temporary church but, over half a century later, it's still in use. Monday morning Mass is just finishing as I enter. With its blond wood benches and pink carpet, it's more functional than frills. And yet, when I allow it, I notice how much emotion this place stirs in me. The church is steeped in memory, particularly of my time as an altar boy.

I walk up through the church and through a door to the left of the altar into the low-ceilinged sacristy. A modest space of drawers and cupboards, seeing the yellow marble-effect counter top prompts the first flashback. My first panicked taste of alcohol: a careless altar boy trying to sup up the Mass wine I'd spilled on the counter before it dripped on to the floor.

Leading off the sacristy and down a narrow corridor behind the altar, a space like the backstage of a theatre, I reach the dim, disused area that was once the altar boys' changing room. It's like a passage tomb now. There are no altar boys. Even the altar girl phenomenon has died out. And yet everything else is still here, covered in dust and grime. In the corner is the small nook with a sink, used to fix up the altar flowers. Whenever I was in here on my own, I liked to mess with the green blocks (the trade name Oasis pops back into my head) used to arrange the flowers. When saturated with water, the green substance held the flowers in place and kept them alive. Dried out, you could stick your finger into a block or break off a corner and rub it between your fingers. With very little effort, something that seemed firm could be reduced to dust. It's an apt image for what has happened here: this church is dried out, a block of dust held together by habit.

Once, St Monica's was just another suburban Dublin parish that looked salt-of-the-earth solid. For me, the oasis began to crumble in the summer of 1997. I was working in New York City on a J1 student visa when I received a letter from my younger brother. I found it recently. Scrawled and ripped from a spiral notepad, scraggly bits of paper at the top, a bulletin of form-follows-function urgency:

Father McGennis has been given an 18-month jail sentence and another 9-month sentence to run concurrently for indecently assaulting a 13-year-old girl in hospital in 1960 . . . I have to say I don't know how I feel about it.

Over twenty years later, ambivalence remains in Edenmore about Paul McGennis, his past and how it caught up with him during his time here. Three decades before he came to us, as a young chaplain in Our Lady's Hospital for Sick Children in Crumlin, he had sexually abused and taken obscene pictures of a young patient called Marie Collins. The abuse ruined her life for decades. But then she came forward to press charges, one of Ireland's first clerical sexual abuse survivors to do so. Another woman from another parish did the same. The McGennis conviction helped tip Catholic Ireland, already primed for collapse, into a tailspin – and St Monica's with it.

There are just two slim blue files on St Monica's in the Dublin diocesan archives. Housed in a wing of Holy Cross College, the former seminary for Dublin, the archive is a treasure trove of a vanished world. Even the sparse documents held on my parish speak volumes about mid-century Irish Catholicism, its untroubled confidence, its ways and means of establishing itself on the map, and in people's minds.

More than a century before it became a Dublin suburb – and parish – the Parliamentary Gazetteer of 1844–45 describes Raheny and neighbouring districts rather grandly as 'brilliant and beautiful, at once in natural luxuriance, in artificial decoration and in free command of a most lovely and gorgeous landscape'.

Behind Dollymount beach were meadows, orchards and quiet country roads linking the grand houses associated with famous names like the brewing dynasties Guinness and Jameson, and hotelier Thomas Gresham.

That all changed in 1954, diocesan files show, when Dublin Corporation's chief planner sent Archbishop John Charles McQuaid a full report into the corporation's development plans for Edenmore, including details of compulsory purchase orders. At the time the Catholic Church was the main provider of health and education in the Republic, and this correspondence is an indicator of how this close co-operation with the state functioned in its first decades of independence. The nuns came first, in 1956. The Poor Servants of the Mother of God bought land to build a convent. It's still there, with an adjoining nursing home. Then in 1962, Dublin Corporation sold the archdiocese sites in Edenmore for schools and a church, at cost price: £4,575.

A few days later I visit the Dublin City Archives on Pearse Street to view the plans for the rest of Edenmore: ambitious, unrealized blueprints on crunchy tracing paper for a library, a circular 'sunken piazza', and a monumental cinema with a tall clock tower. None of these were built, as architectural optimism yielded to cost-conscious reality. By the late 1960s the real Edenmore had emerged: a windy, open-air shopping precinct and terraces of corporation houses on a triangular area, bordered by three main roads. Families moved out here from inner-city tenements, others were new arrivals from outside Dublin.

At the heart of the new community was a site for a permanent church. It was never built and neither city nor diocesan archives have any blueprints for this phantom structure. In July 1966 Archbishop McQuaid consecrated the modest temporary structure after St Monica. There are no details on file about that occasion but the diocesan papers contain a programme for a school consecration on 17 December 1968. It spells out the pecking order of that time: the architect was to hand the key of St Malachy's Boys' School to the archbishop who would, in turn, hand the key to an unnamed Department of Education official. The state had funded around 85 per cent of the school capital cost – but it was built on church land, albeit purchased at cost after notification from Dublin Corporation's chief planner. The transition from unspoiled meadow to concrete reality called St Monica's is more than just an example of close church–state co-operation. Such a term sounds mysterious and abstract: this was Irish people – mostly men – in various institutions, working closely to establish structures of control in a new community.

After the handing over of the key, the programme for the school consecration instructs parishioners to proceed to a Mass in St Monica's Church (*'Rise as Archbishop enters and kneel as he passes up centre aisle . . .'*).

From then on, only one topic dominates the diocesan files on St Monica's – money. Or, more precisely, what to do about the £58,564 overdraft the new parish had inherited. In anxious letters to the archbishop Fr Foley, the first parish priest, tells the archbishop how the bank is 'pressing for regular payments' from the new, indebted parish. Salvation comes in a glossy brochure, a copy of which is still in

the file, carrying the name ‘Planned Giving’ and laying out plans for a door-to-door envelope collection. The brochure, to be delivered to every household in the parish, explains in friendly but firm terms what is to happen in order to make giving a planned part of life in St Monica’s. The text urges parishioners to open their homes to a visiting local man who ‘comes as a friend . . . [and] does not come to beg, nor to pry into your affairs . . . His purpose is to help you, if you need help, in deciding how much you should give.’

Considering this is a voluntary collection, the brochure has remarkably robust views on how much to contribute.

[A gift to the church] should have its rightful place in our budget . . . no gift can be worthy unless it costs us an effort – it must be something we will miss . . . Our gift should reflect our Catholic beliefs – that all we have comes from God; that we are only returning what is His; that we are responsible for the use of His gifts.

I’m reminded of the line from a fundraiser in the Eddie Murphy film *Coming to America*: ‘We’re happy to get the kind of money that jingles, but we’d rather the kind that folds.’

Reading further into these files, and copious follow-up reports, the Dublin Archdiocese’s new parish model worked here as follows: it acquires land at cost from the city, builds a church with the bank’s money, transfers the overdraft to the local parish, leans on parishioners to make sacrifices to pay off the debt, while insisting the buildings they are paying off – and the money they are using to do so – belong to God, or his earthly representatives.

The brochure also tells the tale of 1960s gender roles, with a photograph of smiling Edenmore women, sitting at school desks, who organized ‘Loyalty Suppers’. ‘Their task is now finished and our men take over,’ the brochure says. The men aren’t squeezed into desks for their photograph, I note. Instead they look dynamic as they pose in the church in their winter coats, perhaps on their way to visit the homes, as promised. How many of those men, I wonder, had compassionate eyes and ears and could sense people’s struggles raising their young children, paying their corporation rent, and now facing financial demands from the parish?

The record shows that 965 families signed pledge cards and received

a box of dated envelopes. It also flags 120 ‘non-participating families’ who would require further attention. Fr Foley invited the archbishop to visit St Monica’s volunteers for a ‘pep-talk’.

‘Very unwise procedure,’ noted McQuaid on the letter. ‘Has always failed. Follow Wells pattern.’ This is a reference to the Wells Organization, a US-based professional fundraising outfit engaged by the Dublin Archdiocese – including for the St Monica’s ‘Planned Giving’ drive. A visit by the archbishop might impress the locals, but it could shatter illusions, too. The brochure’s familiar tone implies the local fundraising campaign was grassroots. The implementation was, but operating to an outside template bought in from outside and imposed from above.

Reading the slim St Monica’s file is illuminating, showing a professional approach to fundraising of which few in the parish were aware. In its final report the Wells Organization consultant, who oversaw planning meetings in St Monica’s, praises the local men recruited by the parish priest. They went door to door, as the ‘real core of the Church [with] a deep sense of fellowship’. The file doesn’t contain anything to indicate the Wells Organization’s cut of the proceeds for its services.

After an enthusiastic start, not everything went to plan with ‘Planned Giving’ in St Monica’s. Actual contributions fell short of pledges by a half. The archdiocese warned Fr Foley about the ‘falling standard of giving’ and suggested he agree to further professional fundraising drives.

Sitting in the Diocesan Archives, I don’t know what I expected to find in the St Monica’s files – but it wasn’t this. Perhaps I was naïve to expect records of parish concerns, hopes or ambitions. Instead the folders contain a series of financial reports and a pile of letters that accompanied cheques for supplementary parish collections: Lateran Sunday (to support the Pontifical University in Rome); Holy Cross College, Clonliffe (to support the local seminary); Northern Ireland; Pakistan Relief; the Diocesan Central Fund . . . In their cover letters the priests note the level of contributions by per-thousand of population, suggesting that someone in Archbishop’s House maintained a parish donation league table. Perhaps there was a diocesan map with green and red pins.

St Monica's parishioners, many raising large families on low incomes and struggling to make ends meet, were spared the humiliations of old: the priest reading out each parishioner's contribution from the pulpit, starting with the most generous and working his way down. The modern practice was more subtle and professionalized peer pressure with a local face. The message: *money may be tight, but that is no excuse.*

Edenmore's corporation house tenants were allowed to buy their homes eventually. The dwindling numbers of Mass-going parishioners, meanwhile, are still tenants in the church that they have paid for. Of course, someone had to pay the bills in St Monica's. (Today the parish debt is paid off but the envelope collection continues, alongside two Mass collections, to pay the priests, maintain their houses and cars, and run the parish, though with ever-diminishing returns.)

At half a century's distance, the 'Planned Giving' campaign imposed by the archdiocese on St Monica's looks to me more like planned taking. What traces, I wonder, has this early power play left on local parishioners?

There are few left in St Monica's who have seen everything, but the women of the parish choir, now in their seventies, have been here since the start. Sitting in a nearby shopping centre, far busier than the Sunday Mass minutes earlier, we find seats in a cafe and make small talk. As we get settled and pour our tea, I get the impression that no one's ever asked them what they've seen in St Monica's. Surrounded by six chatty women, I abandon any hope of asking questions and instead just listen. Soon they're rattling through a half-century cast of clerics: the snobby priest, the fussy priest, the drinking priest, the gentle priest, the sexy priest, the womanizing priest, the abusing priest and the obsessive-compulsive priest. They're mad for their priests. These women, Irish mothers in the 1960s and 1970s, took them all in their stride. They were an in-between generation: more free-spirited than their parents, who would never criticize 'God's holy anointed', yet still creatures of an upbringing and culture far more rigorous and hierarchical than my own.

This Ireland, disappearing over the horizon yet still within reach, was a world of church obedience, tacit signals and unwritten rules.

The rule-givers for these women were often the nuns who taught them. One of the choir women, Brenda, recalls one of the Sisters' many warnings, particularly: 'Giving scandal is like opening a pillow of feathers.' The saying is new to me but the women nod in familiarity; it was just one of many pronouncements religious used to cow and contain them.

The tales pour forth. Happy memories – and there are many – are soon punctuated by less happy ones. Without any prompting from me, talk turns to the humiliations, big and small, these women experienced at the hands of St Monica's passing padre cadre. The tales would be hilarious if they weren't so depressing. Like how the choir, of voluntary singers, was fired by a priest for 'disobedience'. Their crime: raising funds to replace the organ without asking his permission.

Brenda remembers another brush with disobedience. When she dared to demand the renovation of decrepit school rooms, she got a triple dressing-down. First, from the parish priest; then a general admonishment from the pulpit by another priest; and, finally, via barbed remarks from a visiting bishop, who had been told in advance who she was. Decades later, she still remembers sitting on her bed at home, weeping with frustration.

The other women nod in sympathy, and recognition, and tell similar stories. Theirs are shocking tales of everyday callousness and emotional violence told by the mothers of today's #metoo generation.

*Did anyone push back?*

Kay suggests 'somebody could have stood up and said no', but isn't sure who that somebody should have been.

'Nobody ever did, that's why it went as it did,' she says quietly.

The huge power discrepancy between priest and parishioners, the roots of control in parishes like St Monica's, was viewed as an order so natural it was rarely discussed or even consciously noted. It was just the way it was. Most of the women gathered here finishing off their tea realize, in hindsight, that the relationship between priests and people was based on an exchange of power and trust. Once abuse of the people's trust went too far – with the McGennis revelations – the clergy's power was undermined terminally. But everything that is clear in hindsight was less clear at the time.

The structures that once seemed impervious to challenge lie in



ruins, but they have left a wincing legacy. In a resigned voice Rita says that there was ‘a lot of fear in the Church. That’s where all this anger came from, a huge backlash because they had such control.’

As they gather their things these women, all still practising Catholics, say their faith remains strong but private. A clergy that once dominated them now seems pitifully weak. Looking back, Brenda wonders if the priests were so arrogant because they were so revered.

‘Weren’t we very stupid,’ she says, ‘to believe everything they told us?’

Behind her bright tone, I hear pain.

Back at St Monica’s Church, the morning Mass-goers are long gone, as is the priest. But sacristan Bridie Kelly is still here, just as she’s been for fifty years. With salty Dublin humour to match her accent, she has mastered the art of motherly chastisement that gets the best results with Irish priests. The foolish priests cross her, the smart ones know to not even try.

As she tidies the sacristy, she tells me how a boy from St Malachy’s school asked her recently, ‘Missus, is this your church?’

“‘Why?’” says I.

‘Says he, “Because you’re always here.”’

Bridie’s seen it all here: an IRA funeral with an all-female armed guard of honour; a bomb scare; robbers who dragged her by her neck through the church, looking for the collection money. She stepped in once when a priest was a no-show for Mass, leading a prayer service with little fuss. She stepped in, too, when another priest’s housekeeper ran out of his house, screaming that she had seen the Virgin Mary on the stairs. Her voice lowers when talk turns to 1997, when parishioners learned why Fr Paul McGennis was gone for good.

‘We knew something was up, as he came and went from the parish, but few asked questions. We knew it was permanent when his name disappeared from his Confession box.’

Paul McGennis pleaded guilty to four counts of indecent assault. After an appeal he served nine months in prison. But the case has never really ended. Not for the now elderly priest, not for his victims, not for his sister – a teacher in a local school – and certainly not for the parishioners of St Monica’s.

When her case became public, Marie Collins, abused by McGennis in 1960, told me she had begged Archbishop Desmond Connell to send counsellors to St Monica's. He never bothered.

'They left it up to poor old Fr Geaney,' says Bridie, sitting in the empty sacristy.

Michael Geaney was the parish priest at the time, a silver-haired, soft-spoken Corkman who struggled to impose any authority on Paul McGennis. He knew his curate was a strange one, but not a serious problem. Though McGennis got on famously with children, his demeanour and body language helped him keep adults out of his life – and his house. Not even his fellow priests got past his front door. After underestimating his curate, it fell to Michael Geaney to explain the unfolding McGennis horror to parishioners.

I was in New York at the time, but Bridie watched Fr Geaney's ordeal up close: 'He started to cry and ran out the back there, I had to run out after him into the field and bring him back. He nearly threw up. It was a terrible time, an awful time.'

I was born in 1977 and, though I worked alongside him closely as an altar boy, I remember little about Paul McGennis during his time in St Monica's. He was a shy, balding man in his mid-fifties, with greasy hair, thick glasses and a chronic inability to meet anyone's gaze. He was notorious among parishioners for his long, muttered Masses. Someone once said to me, 'If you want to understand the concept of eternity, go sit through one of his sermons.'

I actually quite liked his sermons. As I mentioned, I was a bookish child and, to me, his sermons' ideas about faith and God and the world – theology for beginners – appealed to me more than the other priests' more pastoral fare. Like the man himself, McGennis Masses were at odds with their surroundings.

Though he liked a long Mass, Paul McGennis also liked to cut it fine with time, roaring up behind the church at the last minute in a white VW Beetle, usually filled with children. As he readied himself for Mass, I often opened the sacristy door and watched them playing with the car lights, wipers, radio. Why were they not coming into Mass, I wondered, and where were their parents?

I saw the same children – or were they different ones? – when my

mother sent me to his house to get his signature on papers for the school board of management, of which both were members. He never answered the door, a child always did. Looking into the dim hallway, I saw more children dangling from the bannister or looking down from the upstairs landing. How many had he taken in? I felt as little connection to these children, mostly girls, as I did to the boys from the corporation houses in my class at school. One part of my brain found it all deeply strange, but another part accepted it. The set-up felt like the 1980s television sitcom *Diff'rent Strokes*, but with an edge rather than laughs.

My younger brother felt the same. In his 1997 letter, he said that he suspected 'there was more to it than just those two offences'. He wrote:

I always remember the [surname omitted] and [surname omitted] kids in his house regularly. I knew about this two months ago but didn't want to say anything lest I slander the man. It's quite a sordid affair but at the same time I find it very interesting how different people are reacting.

My brother doesn't remember now who had what reaction then. By the time I returned from New York in September, ready to learn more about the greatest scandal ever to rock our sleepy parish, I was surprised and disappointed to find it had been buried. McGennis was not referred to, as if he – and the scandal – had never happened.

I'm curious to know more, at two decades' distance, about the motivation to close down debate.

Were people afraid to scatter the nuns' metaphorical feathers of scandal – or were they concerned some of the feathers might blow back on them?