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**MORAL MATTERS: SIN WITHIN THE CHURCH IS BORN IN SEMINARIES**

*Dr Mark Dooley*

I am not in the habit of writing this column in anger, for nothing stymies moral clarity more than senseless fury. But there times when anger is morally justified, such as when we encounter injustice or corruption. Even Christ, whose message of love is the cornerstone of Christianity, could not restrain his rage when he discovered the desecration of the temple in Jerusalem.

We in Ireland are currently witnessing a similar, if not much worse form of desecration. As I wrote in this newspaper last Wednesday, Irish seminaries are hotbeds of serious moral decay which is devastating the Church in this country.

Their culture is one which rejects piety and holiness in favour of religious laxity and moral confusion. This is resulting in priests who, as I wrote, barely believe in the doctrine they are ordained to promote.

Once again, in other words, the temple has been hijacked by those Christ banished from its courts. This time, however, they are not in the business of changing money and selling doves, but of prostituting their priestly principles to an ideology which runs contrary to their faith.

That is the source not only of my anger, but of the deep frustration felt by scores of seminarians who must live with this problem while preparing for the priesthood.

I know that, not only because I have had the pleasure of lecturing some of them over the past number of years at NUI Maynooth. In recent days, I have also been inundated with letters of support from many more who found my article to be a source of comfort and consolation.

These are courageous young men who, like me, believe that the seminary system is the fundamental cause of the crisis in the Church.

As one seminarian put it, 'if Ford has a problem with cars, there is only one place they go to root out the fault: the factory.'

The Pope knows this, which is why he said en route to Fatima this week that the greatest threat to Catholicism 'is born of sin within the Church.' That sin begins to fester at the moment of formation, and has the potential to destroy some priests and the unfortunate parishes in which they are placed.

Let me spell it out as clearly as I can: very few who enter the seminary system in this country stay the course. According to one individual, of the fourteen who started in formation last year, only eight remain.

Why? Not, as you might imagine, because they revealed themselves to be lacking in sanctity.

In many cases, it is because they were deemed too devout! Another seminarian passionately laments that he is not allowed to kneel during Mass. In the course of his studies, certain 'priestly' professors have informed him that there is 'no such thing as transubstantiation [the conversion of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ], and that he should not look to Rome as 'they don't know anything.' Worse still is the fact that those who wish to uphold the old devotions, such as the Rosary, are frowned upon.

All are taught that the Eucharist should not be taken literally, but is a mere 'memorial' of an historical event. This means that the Holy Mass should be interpreted, not as the moment when Christ crosses the barrier between time and eternity, but as a simple 'gathering' of the 'community.'

Those who object are either sidelined or shown the door. Those, in other words, who consider the priest an alter Christus, or another Christ, are driven from its potential ranks, or made to suffer for the sin of simply longing to make manifest their Lord. Meanwhile, others whose lifestyle is a travesty of the priestly life are made to feel at home.

As many seminarians have confirmed, excessive drinking and dubious sexual practices in the seminaries are simply overlooked.

How on earth can the Catholic Church in Ireland recover when the very people charged with training our future priests are doing such damage? It seems perfectly obvious to me that the only way you are going to counter this catastrophe is by forming priests in the image of Christ. But that, to their great shame, is precisely what Irish seminaries are refusing to do, seeing it as a retrograde step.

That is why the 'apostolic visitations' promised by Pope Benedict in his recent pastoral letter to the Irish people cannot happen too soon.

And they must begin right at the heart of the rot, in those places which punish the pure and reward the reckless. They must start by listening to those brave former students of mine, who have had to live in fear for simply wanting to imitate Christ.

In the meantime, the Irish bishops must stop turning a blind eye to what is going on in their seminaries.

They must follow Diarmuid Martin, and show moral courage in eliminating 'the narrow culture of clericalism' which has poisoned the prospects of so many potentially great

Irish priests. And they must do so fast, before their decades of unforgivable inaction results in the complete extinction of Irish Catholicism.

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*Mark Dooley's book, 'Why Be a Catholic?' will be published by Continuum early next year.*