

Letters

Bishop of Derry Calls for end to celibacy in Catholic church

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Dr. Edward Daly's call to end the ban on clerical celibacy in the Catholic Church is refreshing, even if belated, at a time when Episcopal courage and bold vision are at a minimum. Although it is true that "Catholic priests have been unable to marry since the Gregorian reforms in the 11th century made celibacy compulsory" (Sept. 13, Guardian), there is a further dimension to this complex story for Ireland where married priests ministered in the Celtic Church for centuries, because of its independence of, not toleration by the Roman See. St. Patrick himself says that he was the son of a deacon and the grand-son of a priest.

Pope Adrian IV, the only English man to ever hold that title, had issued a Papal Bull, authorizing King Henry II to invade Ireland "to proclaim the truths of the Christian religion to a rude and ignorant people" on condition that a penny should be yearly paid from each house to the See of Rome, and that he would Romanize the Celtic Church. Pope Adrian had also issued a Papal Bull which banned the clergy from marrying. In 1172, Henry II, to complete his conquest of Ireland, convened the Synod of Cashel where Adrian's Bull was presented to the Irish bishops for their endorsement. They also affirmed their loyalty to Rome and fidelity to Henry's sovereign dominion over Ireland. This was the final nail in the coffin of the ancient Celtic Church of St. Patrick, and of Celtic Ireland with its own rich and ancient traditions. Henry's promise to Romanize the Irish church was complete.

However, the ban on marriage for clergy was not easily implemented and continued to smoulder for several centuries causing the Council of Trent in 1563 to reaffirm the tradition of celibacy. In Ireland, the issue was best expressed by Brian Merriman in his *Cúirt An Mheán Oíche*, c. 1780, where the women of Ireland put their men and priests on trial for their lack of love-making and failure to marry:

"But oye, my heart will grow grey hairs
Brooding forever on idle cares,
Has the Catholic Church a glimmer of sense
That the priests won't marry like anyone else....
It passes the wit of mortal man
What Ireland has lost by this stupid ban."
(The Midnight Court, trans. By Frank O'Connor, 1945)

Dr Daly, who acknowledges that he is "not engaged in a popularity contest", travels in some very ancient and honorable company. Perhaps, his public statement might cause other Irish bishops, and the primary bishop in Rome, to ponder "what Ireland has lost by this stupid ban".