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This is a republic, not the Vatican

Never before has the head of an Irish government spoken of the Vatican in such terms as Enda Kenny did yesterday. This is what he said:

THE REVELATIONS of the Cloyne report have brought the Government, Irish Catholics and the Vatican to an unprecedented juncture. It's fair to say that after the Ryan and Murphy reports Ireland is, perhaps, unshockable when it comes to the abuse of children.

But Cloyne has proved to be of a different order.

Because for the first time in Ireland, a report into child sexual abuse exposes an attempt by the Holy See, to frustrate an inquiry in a sovereign, democratic republic – as little as three years ago, not three decades ago.

And in doing so, the Cloyne report excavates the dysfunction, disconnection, elitism – the narcissism – that dominate the culture of the Vatican to this day. The rape and torture of children were downplayed or “managed” to uphold instead, the primacy of the institution, its power, standing and “reputation”.

Far from listening to evidence of humiliation and betrayal with St Benedict's “ear of the heart”, the Vatican's reaction was to parse and analyse it with the gimlet eye of a canon lawyer. This calculated, withering position being the polar opposite of the radicalism, humility and compassion upon which the Roman Church was founded.

The radicalism, humility and compassion which are the very essence of its foundation and purpose. The behaviour being a case of *Roma locuta est: causa finita est*.

Except in this instance, nothing could be further from the truth.

Cloyne's revelations are heart-breaking. It describes how many victims continued to live in the small towns and parishes in which they were reared and in which they were abused. Their abuser often still in the area and still held in high regard by their families and the community. The abusers continued to officiate at family weddings and funerals. In one case, the abuser even officiated at the victim's own wedding.

There is little I or anyone else in this House can say to comfort that victim or others, however much we want to. But we can and do recognise the bravery of all of the victims who told their stories to the commission.

While it will take a long time for Cloyne to recover from the horrors uncovered, it could take the victims and their families a lifetime to pick up the pieces of their shattered existence.

A DAY POST publication, the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade met with the papal nuncio to Ireland, Archbishop Giuseppe Leanza. The Tánaiste left the archbishop clear on two things:

The gravity of the actions and attitude of the Holy See;

and Ireland's complete rejection and abhorrence of same.

The Papal Nuncio undertook to present the Cloyne report to the Vatican. The Government awaits the considered response of the Holy See.

I believe that the Irish people, including the very many faithful Catholics who – like me – have been shocked and dismayed by the repeated failings of church authorities to face up to what is required, deserve and require confirmation from the Vatican that they do accept, endorse and require compliance by all church authorities here with, the obligations to report all cases of suspected abuse, whether current or historical, to the State's authorities in line with the Children First national guidance which will have the force of law.

Clericalism has rendered some of Ireland's brightest, most privileged and powerful men, either unwilling or unable to address the horrors cited in the Ryan and Murphy reports.

This Roman clericalism must be devastating for good priests, some of them old; others struggling to keep their humanity, even their sanity, as they work so hard to be the keepers of the church's light and goodness within their parishes, [their] communities [and within] the human heart.

But thankfully for them, and for us, this is not Rome.

Nor is it industrial-school or Magdalene Ireland, where the swish of a soutane smothered conscience and humanity and the swing of a thurible ruled the Irish-Catholic world.

This is the *Republic* of Ireland 2011.

A republic of laws, of rights and responsibilities; of proper civic order; where the delinquency and arrogance of a particular version, of a particular kind of "morality", will no longer be tolerated or ignored.

As a practising Catholic, I don't say any of this easily.

Growing up, many of us in here learned we were part of a pilgrim church. Today, that church needs to be a penitent church. A church, truly and deeply penitent for the horrors it perpetrated, hid and denied. In the name of God. But for the good of the institution. When I say that through our legislation, through our Government's action to put children first, those who have been abused can take some small comfort in knowing that they belong to a nation, to a democracy where humanity, power, rights, responsibility are enshrined and enacted – always, always for their good. Where the law – their law – as citizens of this country, will always supersede canon laws that have neither legitimacy nor place in the affairs of this country.

This report tells us a tale of a frankly brazen disregard for protecting children. If we do not respond swiftly and appropriately as a State, we will have to prepare ourselves for more reports like this.

I agree with Archbishop Martin that the church needs to publish any other and all other reports like this as soon as possible.

I must note the commission is very positive about the work of the National Board for Safeguarding Children, established by the church to oversee the operation by dioceses and religious orders. The commission notes that all church authorities were required to sign a contract with the national board agreeing to implement the relevant standards and that those refusing to sign would be named in the board's annual report.

Progress has been in no small measure [due] to the commitment of Ian Elliott and others. There is some small comfort to be drawn by the people of Cloyne from the fact that the commission is complimentary of the efforts made by the diocese since 2008, in training, in vetting personnel and in the risk management of priests against whom allegations have been made.

Nevertheless, the behaviour of Bishop Magee and Monsignor O'Callaghan show how fragile even good standards and policies are to the weakness and wilful disregard of those who fail to give the right priority to safeguarding our children.

BUT IF THE Vatican needs to get its house in order, so does this State. The report of the commission is rightly critical of the entirely unsatisfactory position which the last government allowed to persist over many years.

The unseemly bickering between the minister for children and the HSE over the statutory powers to deal with extra-familial abuse, the failure to produce legislation to enable the exchange of soft information as promised after the Ferns inquiry, and the long period of confusion and disjointed responsibility for child protection within the HSE, as reported by the commission, are simply not acceptable in a society which values children and their safety.

For too long Ireland has neglected its children.

Just last week we saw a case of the torture of children, within the family, come before the courts. Just two days ago, we were repulsed by the case of a Donegal registered sex offender and school caretaker – children and young adults reduced to human wreckage – raising questions and issues of serious import for State agencies.

We are set to embark on a course of action to ensure the State is doing all it can to safeguard our children.

Minister [for Justice Alan] Shatter is bringing forward two pieces of legislation – firstly, to make it an offence to withhold information relating to crimes against children and vulnerable adults; and secondly, at long last, to allow for the exchange of “soft information” on abusers.

As Taoiseach, I want to do all I can to protect the sacred space of childhood and to restore its innocence, especially our young teenagers, whom I believe to be children, because regardless of our current economic crisis, the children of this country are, and always will be, our most precious possession of all.

Safeguarding their integrity and innocence must be a national priority. This is why I undertook to create a Cabinet ministry for children and youth affairs. The legislation Children First proposes to give our children maximum protection and security without intruding on the hectic, magical business of being a child.

Cardinal Josef Ratzinger [the current Pope Benedict] said: “Standards of conduct appropriate to civil society or the workings of a democracy cannot be purely and simply applied to the church.”

As the Holy See prepares its considered response to the Cloyne report, as Taoiseach, I am making it absolutely clear, that when it comes to the protection of the children of this State, the standards of conduct which the church deems appropriate to itself, cannot and will not, be applied to the workings of democracy and civil society in this republic.

Not purely, or simply or otherwise.

Children . . . First.