

# ‘The Devil Has Not Gone Away’ But the Faith Runs Deep in Ireland

*“There is an old prophecy that the Faith in Ireland will nearly die out, but will re-ignite and turn the nation into a bonfire of Catholicism.”*

*Father Tom Forde, OFM Cap, is a Chaplain at the University of Cork. In this deeply serious interview, he unflinchingly discusses the agony of Irish Catholicism today — and points to an unexpected light on Ireland’s dark horizon.*

**Q. What do you think is the greatest myth about Ireland today?**

A. That we are still the old Ireland, a country filled with green hills and sheep. The reality is that out of a total of about 6 million people in Ireland — 4.5 in the Republic and 1.5 in Northern Ireland— 1.5 million live in or near Dublin alone, with over 500,000 living in Belfast and another 250,000 in Cork. Therefore a sizable portion of the population is urbanized and that alone has an impact on religious practice. Most of the immigrants to Ireland have come from ‘Catholic’ countries but that has not significantly impacted on the practice rates. The Poles especially tend to stick together and intend to return to Poland.

**Q. Could you provide some insight on what’s happening to the Faith in Ireland today?**

A. The Faith runs deep. Human beings are naturally religious and the Irish are no different. Mary Kenny (an Irish Catholic journalist) has a book where she argues that the faith and interests of the laity of one generation determines the faith and interests of the clergy of the next. When the people were pro-British we had generations of clergy who were also pro-British but when the people turned against the British the clergy did too. The exception, she believes, were the religious who were often counter-cultural. It’s an interesting argument.

**Q. What have been the major trends contributing to the lack of religious practice in Ireland today?**

A. There is a connection between the decline in the practice of the Faith in Ireland and the swing away from traditional values, between a skepticism about nationalism, an increasing devotion to consumerism and above all the widespread embracing of contraception. On the latter point if one could chart the decline in Mass attendance and the increase in contraceptive availability/sales (especially after legalization in 1979) I think there would be a clear correlation.

**Q. This is not unique to Ireland, of course.**

A. Yes. The same rebellious spirit that swept the Church, especially in Europe and the States, swept Ireland too but it took a little longer to have its effect. Ireland looks much more to the States than to probably any other country largely due to the sheer numbers of emigrants who have gone there.

**Q. Has this affected the Irish clergy?**

A. The Irish Church is no different (than the people). America has long been the country of choice for religious and clergy to study since travel there became cheaper and easier. That swing away from Europe towards the U.S. has meant that the liberalism that has dominated the American Church has also dominated the Irish if in a more toned-down form. The clerical promoters of the morality of contraception seem to have received little resistance within the Irish Church in the 70’s or since.

**Q. And what about today?**

A. The bishops say the right things but do little it seems to correct abuses until they are public scandals. One Irish priest Fr. Iggy O’Donovan, a religious, was deprived of faculties in the Archdiocese of Armagh after he had publically celebrated Mass with a Protestant minister as concelebrant and carried out invalid baptisms. He was granted faculties in another diocese (Limerick). That was last year!

There is not much confidence in the Irish bishops – they are not very inspiring. Apart from Child Protection (at which the Irish Church now excels) the dioceses of Ireland are not known for doing anything well. Even the Eucharistic Congress in 2011 was like a throwback to the 80’s! Unfortunately despite Pope Francis’ warnings against

careerism it still thrives. There are also dark rumours of some of the filth that Pope Benedict spoke about. The devil has not gone away.

**Q. To what do you attribute this?**

A. I think that the Irish Church, like the Irish nation, is largely in decline due to the embracing of contraception. Contraception is the technology by which the net fertility rate has declined to as low as 1.8 (should be at the replacement rate – a minimum of 2.1) and although it has temporarily jumped up a little it is still below 2.1. It has been below the replacement rate since the late 80’s. Our nation like the rest of the West and much of the civilized world is in decline.

**Q. Contraception is a technology that is used by non-Catholics as well, of course.**

A. Yes, but for the Church this is a double blow. The people who contracept are largely Catholic and this places them in conflict with the Church’s official teaching and God’s plan. Even if they are reassured by some clergy, in their hearts they know the two are irreconcilable. With a refusal to co-operate with God’s plan for human sexuality and fertility – a moral problem – there comes the spiritual problem that faith does not thrive under disobedience and this means an interior conflict. That interior conflict leads to either repentance or exterior rebellion – they walk away. It also means that not only will vocations not thrive in such an atmosphere but a contracepting people will not conceive enough babies to support their own future let alone the priesthood and the future of the Church.

**Q. Certainly contraception is not the only reason why the Irish have turned away from their Church?**

A. Of course not. Neither can it be denied that the abuse of children by clergy and religious both in institutions and in private has done immense damage to the Faith in Ireland.

It has done immense damage to the victims and their families. It has been a body blow to faithful clergy, religious and laity. It has reassured some that it is right to walk away. It has erected walls across the path to the Faith for others. It has handed the enemies of the Faith and the Church a weapon with which to scourge and torture.

**Q. Yes, Catholics in many countries are familiar with this agony — and with the fury it generates.**

A. Today, it is not easy to be Catholic in public in Ireland. But the Church and the Faith were in decline even before the scandals broke. Some suggest that the abuse of children and vulnerable adults by clergy, religious and laity are signs that something had gone profoundly wrong in Ireland (as it obviously had in other countries e.g. Holland). The rot was already there spreading beneath the veneer of Irish Catholicism.

**Q. These are dark days indeed for the Faith in Ireland.**

A. Nevertheless, there are signs of hope. There is an old prophecy that the Faith in Ireland will nearly die out but will re-ignite and turn the nation into a bonfire of Catholicism.

There are small groups of young people ardent for the Faith all over the country. They are already like veterans so toughened by opposition that they take it for granted. You have to have a thick skin to be Catholic in many parts of Ireland. Eventually some of them will make it not only into the clergy but into the episcopacy and perhaps then we will see a change.

In the meantime there are clergy who are loyal to the Faith and who want to see it flourish. They are quietly organizing and working to reinforce and to rebuild what they can.

The Irish Church has a long dark road still ahead of her but she is not alone – she never was.