

Should Bishop Murray Resign?

Statement in light of the Murphy Report.

The easiest thing to do in the present circumstances is to keep silent in order to avoid causing offence or to attract adverse comment. But as we have been reminded by the recent Reports on Child Sexual Abuse, silence does not necessarily serve truth. Nor can one wrong be righted by another wrong.

Having worked closely both with victims of child sexual abuse and with perpetrators, I am in no way oblivious to the horror of this crime, and to its lasting damage. As a consequence, over the past ten years I have been openly critical in particular of the failure of Church leadership to acknowledge the systemic and cultural weaknesses in the governance of the Church which colluded with and facilitated child sexual abuse.

Bishop Donal Murray has effectively handed over the decision as to whether he should remain as Bishop of Limerick to the people and priests of his diocese. Theologically, this can be justified; canonically, he must be satisfied that he can lead his diocese effectively.

However, the view of the people and priests of Limerick diocese is not to be confused or equated with popular public opinion as influenced, interpreted and reported by the media.

Unfortunately, some bishops when asked in the past few days to comment on Bishop Murray's position have failed to make this important distinction. In fact, we are in the unprecedented position of senior Irish bishops, however inadvertently, contributing to the impression that it is ultimately a matter of public opinion and media pressure as to whether bishops should step aside.

Regrettably, many bishops have not acknowledged that there has been corporate failure by them all, and that the very manner in which the office of bishop on this island was and still is exercised, is in need of thorough scrutiny and review. No Church leader has yet acknowledged the fact that if much more open, accountable and participative decision-making processes are needed with regard to Child Protection, it follows that such processes are also needed with regard to other aspects of the Church's governance and mission, and that this should be urgently investigated.

No bishop has yet acknowledged that it is, in fact, the integrity of the office of bishop that is now on trial.

It is for the priests and people of Limerick to judge how good a pastor of their diocese Bishop Murray has been since his appointment almost a decade and a half ago.

It is significant that to my knowledge few bishops have yet sought to influence the court of public opinion in its trial of Bishop Murray by recalling the many exemplary ways he has served the Irish Church in almost thirty years as a bishop; this, despite the fact that they have relied heavily upon his international standing as a scholar especially regarding Faith and Culture issues and Catholic Education. No doubt well-deserved plaudits from his colleagues would follow if Bishop Murray decided to resign.

It is one thing not to protect someone who has done wrong; it is another to collude in his scapegoating. There are many respects in which Bishop Murray has served the Irish Church and its

people well, and this should not be forgotten when the focus is on his failings and when resignation is being considered. Or is it the accepted view that an episcopal resignation at this time would make it easier for the media circus to move on?

Not all mistakes made by bishops have received the full glare of publicity and not all bishops who have been rightly publicly criticised have acknowledged their failings as fully as Bishop Murray. The Church has more to learn from those who have made mistakes and learned from them than from those whose mistakes have not yet come to light or who have refused to acknowledge failure.

As far back as 2002, Bishop Murray openly acknowledged as a matter of the greatest regret that he did not manage at that time to get to the root of the problem with what subsequently turned out to be a clear case of horrendous child sexual abuse. I do not believe that scapegoating him now will ultimately serve the healing of victims or the healing of the Church.

What is needed instead, is a commitment by all the Irish bishops to an open, self-effacing and rigorous enquiry into all aspects of ecclesial governance in this country; an enquiry inclusive of the diversity of Catholic opinion which takes into account not only important critical findings with regard to ecclesial governance by state tribunals but also theological reflection upon the true nature of the Church and the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

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