

EXCURSUS 1

Gerry Fitzgerald on LETTER FROM IRELAND

Christopher Maher, a Holy Ghost father who has been living in Ohio since 1958, returned to Dublin two summers ago expecting the kind of friendly deference Catholic priests met in public before he emigrated. Instead, he complained in a letter to *The Irish Times*, his pocket was picked by two blond teenagers.

Ireland, as the returned priest discovered, has changed a lot since the 1950s. Then deeply mired in poverty, distinctively rural in outlook, and isolated culturally from the rest of Europe, the country modeled its behavior and its laws on the values of a powerful and conservative Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, as the Irish government discovered in the early 1950s when it tried to introduce a mother-and-child health scheme that could have resulted in sex education by medical officers not of the same religion as their patients, the nation's secular powers had less real authority than the Church. The minister pushing the scheme had to resign, and the government itself was voted out of office soon after.

Just how much things have changed since then became evident when, in the face of vocal objections by many Catholic bishops, the Irish Parliament voted 83 to 80 last February to make nonmedical contraceptives available to anyone

eighteen years or older. Under a 1979 law, the first to make contraceptive sales legal, they had been available—with a doctor's prescription—to married couples only.

The vote did not signal the rise of a new breed of politician; rather than political courage, the vote seemed to represent belated legislative acknowledgement of changes in Irish social attitudes: The average number of children per Irish family has declined more than 20 per cent in the last twelve years, and women here seem increasingly to want the same social freedom enjoyed by their sisters elsewhere. So, while abortion is unobtainable in Ireland, the number of women giving Irish addresses at English abortion clinics has been growing steadily, from 122 in 1969 to 3,677 in 1983.

Nineteen fifty-eight, the year Father Maher left for America, was about the time that Radio Telefis Eireann (RTE), the state broadcasting authority, introduced the overwhelmingly Catholic republic to television. The sources of recent changes in social attitudes here are complex and admittedly difficult to measure, but it is television and other popular media that many conservatives blame for the significant erosion of Catholic Church influence that is evident now in many sectors of national life.

With state censorship now only a memory, Irish television today offers enough sex and violence to satisfy most appetites, but RTE and other media have also challenged the Church in more direct ways. The Saturday night *Late Late Show*, said lay theologian Peadar Kirby in a recent book, *Is Irish Catholicism Dying?*, has for some years now been "something akin to an alternative teaching authority to that of the Church, systematically stimulating discussion and



*"Owned by a Sunni Muslim, trained by a Shiite fundamentalist,
and ridden by a Maronite Christian."*

dissent on issues of moral and religious belief which most Irish Catholics had previously never questioned."

The situation angers Church leaders, who in 1983 approved a new catechism that called the media "perverse" and "damaging to public morals," and complained that it stimulated Irish youth's resistance to traditional religious ideas, particularly those regarding personal sexual morality. One bishop, reports John Cooney, a Dublin journalist who writes often about politics and religion, frequently declares that Irish society is "media-ridden."

Ireland today has a huge foreign debt, unemployment of 17 per cent, and a crime problem that may soon displace the economy as the country's top political issue: Dubliners report one home in three burgled in the last year, sixty car thefts a night, and teenagers who like to ram the stolen vehicles into police cars before abandoning them. Not surprisingly, this is happening in a nation with Europe's largest youth population: More than half of Ireland's citizens are under twenty-five.

A good place to ponder the meaning of such currents is Ballymun, a highrise working-class housing estate on Dublin's north side, where unemployment is nearly 60 per cent and single parents, many of them never wed, head about a third of the households. "I don't know what the statistics are," says Peter McVerry, a Jesuit who shares quarters there with a group of homeless teenagers and several fellow priests. "I just know that every young person I know over the age of seventeen has a child." In Ballymun, adds McVerry, the Church has little influence, especially among the young. "I know very few young people who go to mass. Very few."

When it was last surveyed by the Church a decade ago, weekly mass attendance in the twenty-six-county Republic was a comforting 90 per cent or more. A survey now under way will undoubtedly report much lower rates of attendance, particularly among younger age groups. The situation is serious, concedes Dublin Auxiliary Bishop Dermot O'Mahony, but it is not yet desperate: The Church, he says, has managed to hold a core of young believers who will pass on the faith to a new generation.

However, even that may be small comfort to Church traditionalists, writes theologian Austin Flannery in the current issue of *Religious Life Review*, a pastoral journal for Catholic priests. Reporting on a recent survey in Cork, Flannery says the researchers found almost no support among young mass attendees for the traditional Church view of sexual morality. Only 11 per cent agreed with the teaching on contraception,

for example, and only 8 per cent felt divorce was always wrong.

"The young people quite clearly haven't taken this on board at all," said Flannery, the Dominican priest who edited the English-language documents of Vatican Council II, in an interview. "Clearly, the Church's teaching hasn't got across."

Often in the news recently has been Kevin McNamara, whose installation as archbishop of Dublin in late January signaled a new round of battles in Ireland's Church-State wars. McNamara and his Dublin predecessor, Archbishop Dermot Ryan, led the 1983 campaign to fortify the country's existing ban on abortion by also making it unconstitutional, and observers here reckon that such activism, while polarizing the electorate, was a factor in the Vatican decision to bring him to Dublin from rural Kerry. The new archbishop was quick to criticize the recent government proposal to make nonmedical contraceptives available to the unmarried, and he has pledged to campaign as well against any proposal to remove a ban on divorce, which has been a part of the Irish Constitution since 1937.

"Some contemporary societies have now learned by sad experience the evils that flow from a view of life which sacrifices the good of the family to a false concept of individual liberty," McNamara declared in a sermon just before the New Year. "It is by no means easy, however, to undo the damage that has resulted or to reverse the prevailing trends. It is both wiser and easier to safeguard the family from these evils in the first place. Fortunately in Ireland, there is still time to do so."

The current divorce ban, says Ireland's Divorce Action Group, now denies normal family law protections to survivors of some 35,000 broken marriages who have formed new relationships and begun having children, in many cases after obtaining Church annulments. Without civil divorce, however, the new unions are bigamous in the eyes of the state and the children illegitimate.

If the polls are accurate, slightly more voters favor a divorce law than oppose one. But because it can only be done in two stages and means first putting the constitutional question to referendum, introducing civil divorce involves much higher political costs than liberalizing the contraceptive law. On March 14, an all-party committee that had been considering the problem for two years reported itself unable to agree on the need for divorce legislation. And without all-party agreement, many qualified observers here don't think the government will, by itself, make the effort. One explanation for the parliamentary lassitude is that, despite the large proportion of youth in the population, many are still too young to affect a vote on the issue.

In the mother-and-child health controversy of thirty-four years ago, a similarly difficult question of social principle was resolved by the secular power abjectly capitulating to the spiritual. "The Roman Catholic Church would seem to be the effective government of the country," the Protestant-owned *Irish Times* declared at the time, warning of disastrous consequences to the movement to end the partition of Protestant-majority Northern Ireland.

Although the border still defends more than religious divisions, it is no longer possible to describe the Irish Catholic Church in rigid terms. Social attitudes, moreover, will continue to change, and a decade from now issues of conscience regarding sexual morality, which have for so long



poisoned relations between southern Catholics and northern Protestants, may not be issues at all. You can almost count on it.

Gerry Fitzgerald is a Washington-based writer with a long-standing interest in Ireland and in Church-State relations.

EXCURSUS 2

Thomas Land on CHINA'S NEW HARVEST

China has attained self-sufficiency in cereal production for the first time in its modern history—an immense achievement for a nation of a billion people that has known severe hunger for many years. Such success is a source of hope during this year of agricultural disasters, when drought and famine ravage so many countries in the developing world.

For many years China imported some ten million tons of grain annually from Canada, Australia, and the United States; and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome feared that its continued demands for food imports could become a serious international problem in an increasingly hungry world. China's present food prosperity results from a long-term policy of heavy international investment in agricultural innovation, backed by sweeping social reforms.

But self-sufficiency has been attained sooner than expected thanks to favorable weather conditions that have led to a succession of plentiful harvests. As a result, China has now dropped plans for the construction of several grain-unloading berths intended to serve the import trade. The country has already emerged as a significant exporter of maize to Japan and South Korea—competing against the traditional North American suppliers of those markets—and has set out to upgrade the port of Tianjin to speed the flow of exports.

These may well be only the first signs of a long-term trend affecting the global pattern of commerce, promising improved food security around the hungry belt of the planet. Indeed, the change is heralded in a new \$2 billion financing protocol signed by the Bank of China and the Canadian Export Development Corporation to provide for an expanding class of Chinese imports, such as space-communication

earth stations, devoted to the needs of agriculture.

Less than a tenth of China's immense land area of 960 million hectares is arable, yet agriculture provides a third of the country's gross domestic product. Production is dominated by foodgrains—some 65 per cent of the total farm yield.

During the past five years China has invested in its agricultural industries almost \$570 million raised abroad in hard foreign exchange. More than half the money has come from global development finance institutions and the rest from Western countries. Much of the money has been used to finance almost a hundred joint ventures involving foreign specialists in land reclamation and the introduction of modern farm technology.

China's innovative farm "responsibility system" has meanwhile set the countryside on a new course. Collective teams are now allowed to contract out land—to households primarily, but also to individuals and groups—resulting in greater food production, a wider range of cash crops, and even some "wealthy" peasants. The new agricultural policy aims at creating a direct link between remuneration and production for the first time in modern China. Bonuses are now paid for exceeding agreed production targets, and penalties are imposed to discourage shortfalls. Over the past four years, rural incomes have risen an average of 12 per cent.

A discussion paper just published by the U.N.'s International Labor Organization concludes that these changes do not appear to herald a return to private farming. Land continues to be owned publicly, and its sale is not permitted. Nor is any element of proprietary or inheritance rights implied in the contracting system.

Nevertheless, the Chinese have proved ideal customers for capitalist institutions. In May, 1983, for example, China reached an agreement with the World Bank on an \$80 million loan for the reclamation of 200,000 hectares of wasteland in Heilongjiang province, a potentially fertile grain-growing area. The work began last June, and the FAO says 65,000 hectares of land have been brought under cultivation already.

Using Western specialists, the Beijing Agricultural Institute has imported remote-sensing technology and established a center to train technicians. The space-age technology is now being used in a dozen Chinese provinces and autonomous regions to survey agricultural resources, estimate crop yields, and forecast soil erosion, plant diseases, and insect pests.

Thomas Land writes from Europe on global affairs.

COMING

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