

AN IRISH TRAGEDY

twentieth century, they have so far avoided any ethnic stigma in the United States, even as clergy sex abuse blew up into a crisis within strongly Catholic Ireland itself.

Actually, the significant role of the Irish priests in the American scandal should come as no surprise, simply because priests from Ireland and of Irish ancestry have played such a dominant role in the American church. The best estimates are that 4,000 of them came to the United States, many of them recruited by Irish bishops, to serve the burgeoning Irish immigrant population and save their souls.³¹ By the 1960s, at the peak of their numbers, half of the American priests and three-quarters of the bishops had come from Ireland. During this time when the American Catholic Church was predominantly Irish, in the 1960s and '70s, clergy sex abuse was also at its peak. By the year 2000, the number had declined to 1,221 priests from Ireland, but more than four out of ten American priests said they were of Irish ancestry, maintaining the strong Irish presence in the American Catholic clergy and taking part in the sexual abuse. Much of this abuse had occurred long ago but now was coming to light.³²

A few years ago, my sister Jane asked me about the credibility of those late accusations of abuse after reading that a woman had claimed she was abused more than 40 years earlier by William Skylstad of Spokane, Washington, now a bishop and former head of the national organization of Catholic bishops.³³ (He has denied it.) Jane did not question the accusation as an apologist for the church, because she has mostly given up on the male-dominated institution and developed a personal faith. She just wanted to know why a supposed victim would wait so long to make her claim.

The question can best be answered, I suggest, by the victims themselves, in this case the young girls and often vulnerable women molested at an unusual rate by priests from Ireland. Susan Renehan was one of them. At the age of 11, she had an "innocent crush" on Father Michael Garry, an Irish priest assigned to her parish in the Trenton, N.J., diocese. One of seven children in an alcoholic home, Susan was an insecure "Irish street kid," as she put it. Garry was kind; he talked and listened to her. She was

vulnerable, and Garry took advantage of that. When the priest first sexually abused her, her reaction was “shock, terror, and utter helplessness.” He continued the abuse for three years, assaulting her in his car, cornering her in the school hallway and in the rectory. After he was transferred to another parish he continued to stalk her, tracking her one day after school to a coffee shop where she was waiting with girlfriends to get the train home. “When he offered to give my friends and me a ride home, I was desperate to protect them. That gave me the courage to tell him no,” Susan recalls. “At the time, I was terrified. Today, I’m proud of that. That was the last time I saw him.” Later she learned that he had returned to Ireland, as did many other priest abusers from America. Nonetheless, Renehan kept her sexual abuse by the priest a secret 26 years, long after he died.

This account may sound implausible; a girl going through the trauma of abuse for three years without putting a stop to it and then keeping it a secret for so long. Renehan explained it this way: “The child has no language or resources for dealing with these heinous crimes. And I had been taught that a priest was an authority figure, God’s representative on earth.” When Garry abused her, she would plead, “Please don’t do this,” but she didn’t know how to make him stop. When it was over, she felt trapped by feelings of betrayal and shame, feelings that prompted her to bury it all inside. Finally, at a meeting of abuse survivors in Boston, she realized that she was a victim like many others. So for the first time she told the press about her own abuse. She had shed the shame. But she never told her parents about it, never. “I felt the need to protect them,” she said. “I felt it was something they couldn’t handle.” They died without knowing.³⁴

Many sexual predators, Irish or not, have found their prey among the youngsters who served as “altar boys,” wearing the black and white garments, proudly bringing wine to the altar to be transformed by the priest, according to his church, into the blood of Christ. No priest, and certainly not the stern Fr. George O’Keefe, ever tried to approach me sexually during my time in that role; if one had, I would have been exceedingly confused, knowing so little about sex. But these boys were right there in the inner sanctum of

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HOW SEX ABUSE
BY IRISH PRIESTS
HELPED CRIPPLE THE
CATHOLIC CHURCH



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