

LUX EDMUNDI: REFLECTION: JUNE 2016

In addressing the Dáil on the Cloyne Report, Taoiseach Enda Kenny was scathing in his denunciation of Catholic authorities for their sins of omission and commission in respect of child abuse by clerics. Then and since, this speech has been taken to mark a historic turning point in Church-State relations in Ireland. The deference – sometimes abject - of politician to prelate which had characterised those relations heretofore was notable only by its complete absence. Mr. Kenny was lauded inside the Oireachtas and outside for his refusal to be cowed by “a belt of the crozier”, for, in effect, his moral courage in the face of possible episcopal retaliation.

Moral courage is a virtue essential to the right conduct of affairs, personal, social, political and, indeed, ecclesiastical. It is, in fact, a quality we would all wish to have and we like to think that, if and as need arises, we would shelter the Franks, stop the tanks in Tiananmen Square, blow that whistle loud and long until injustice was undone, justice done. The fact is, of course, that those who thus face down the powers that be are almost always a tiny minority. Where resistance might result in dire consequences for the resistor, most of us would be much more likely to keep our heads down, our noses clean and our opinions to ourselves.

It is arguable, indeed, that, when virtually everyone has a crack off, say, the Church, the likelihood is that the power of the Church to hurt is long gone. When there is no real risk to the kicker, when, again, the Church can be kicked more or less with impunity, there may, in fact, be a kind of kicking frenzy as even the most cagey, the most timid, of us, can thus “man up” on the cheap, as it were.

Real moral courage, of course, would require that we take on those who can still hurt us; that we check and challenge, not the powers that were, but the powers that be; that, in effect, we hit out at those we know will definitely hit back, and hit back harder - as hard as it takes to put us back in our box and to dissuade any who might have thoughts of emulating us from doing anything of the kind.

It may well be the case that, in Ireland now, it takes greater moral courage to defend the Catholic Church than it does to denounce it; more to stand for, than against, religious faith of any kind, especially the Catholic kind. As in so many others, in the field of education, it takes “guts” to protect and promote the Catholic presence; “gumption” – a lot of “gumption” - to remain steadfast in the face of calls that the Church divest itself of schools; that dioceses and religious congregations accept the current view of the Department that – *pace* deeds of trust, model agreements and, even, court decisions – community schools/colleges are not *de iure*, and should not be *de facto*, denominational; that the state determine how religion and morality may, and may not, be taught in our schools.

It is never easy to be counter-cultural, to go against the political flow, to “not go gentle into that goodnight” to which others might wish now to consign us. We have Good News to offer, the best news possible, that “God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (*John* 3:16)”; that in Christ Jesus we have the *eikon* of the invisible God (cf. *Colossians* 1:15) and the paradigm of humanity at its most authentic and its most complete. Individually, collectively, we may, and must, proclaim the Gospel, in and out of season. “With malice towards none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in ... “.