

# 6.

## The Catholic Church and Social Policy<sup>160</sup>

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### Introduction

The influence of the Catholic Church on social policy in Ireland can be identified under two broad headings — a *teaching* influence derived from Catholic social thought and a *practical* influence which arose from the church's role as a major provider of social services. Historically, the second of these was the more important. The church developed a large practical role in the social services before it evolved anything approaching a formal body of social teaching, and its formal teaching in the social field never matched the inventiveness or impact of its social provision. Today, this order is being reversed. The church's role as service provider is dwindling, mainly because falling vocations have left it without the personnel to sustain that role. Its reputation as a service provider has also been tarnished by the revelations of shocking abuses perpetrated by Catholic clergy and religious on vulnerable people (particularly children) placed in their care in the past (see, e.g., the *Ferns Report* – Murphy, Buckley and Joyce, 2005; also O'Raftery and O'Sullivan 2001). Nevertheless, its teaching role in the social field is finding new content and new forms of expression. Despite the corrosive effect of the scandals of the past decade on the church's teaching authority, these new means of influencing social policy debate have considerable potency and may well offer a means by which the church can play an important part in the development of social policy in the future.

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Drawing on this distinction between the church's teaching and provider roles, the present chapter gives a brief overview of the evolution of the church's influence in social policy in Ireland, assesses the present situation and offers some brief comments on possible directions for future development. The chapter adopts the conventional though rather arbitrary definition of 'social policy' which links it to questions of distribution of material resources and services in society. It thereby excludes a whole range of social issues (such as family and sexual matters) on which the Catholic church has for long exerted an influence. In Catholic circles, these latter issues are often classified as 'moral' rather than 'social', and while this is a forced distinction, I will follow it here in order to reduce the field of reference to manageable dimensions.

## **Church as social provider**

Throughout the western world in the nineteenth century, the Catholic church's survival and expansion in the face of social revolution, industrialisation and the spread of secularism rested in part at least on its success in developing a powerful, far-reaching role as a social service provider. Catholic schools, hospitals, orphanages and other similar institutions multiplied and flourished in the course of the nineteenth century and in many instances anticipated the development of similar services by emergent welfare states. In some countries (such as Ireland), the church eventually entered into various forms of partnership with the state in jointly providing social services, in others (such as the United States), it created independent systems which paralleled and in some ways competed with state provision. In any event, no other organisation in the modern western world came as close as did the Catholic church to matching the capacity of the present-day welfare state to fund and deliver mass social services.

A number of institutional devices which the church either invented in the nineteenth century or took out of its traditional repertoire and brought to new levels of development enabled it to develop this role to such effect. One such device was the system of clerical recruitment, training and

deployment in parish ministry. This was based on a model outlined in the Council of Trent in the seventeenth century but which was fully and properly implemented only in the nineteenth century. Parish clergy were usually not of themselves significant providers of social services, as their dominant role was pastoral ministry (though in Ireland, they acquired a peculiar though important role as managers of schools in the national primary school system). But the ubiquitous, disciplined and tightly organised parish system which most national churches cultivated and successfully staffed with clergy in the nineteenth century provided the basic presence of the church in people's lives which was the foundation of its capacity to develop its social provision.

### *The role of the religious congregations*

While parishes provided the remote framework within which Catholic social provision developed, the real drive and energy came from a different institutional source — the religious congregations. Communal ascetic withdrawal traces its origins in the Catholic tradition back to the sixth century Benedictines. The male mendicant orders in the Middle Ages developed that tradition by harnessing the ascetic impulse to the evangelising mission of the church. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Jesuits added a new dimension through the medium of elite education and scholarship, while new charity orders (exemplified by St Vincent de Paul's Congregation of the Mission in seventeenth century France) began to develop methods of working among the poor which combined missionary teaching with charitable service. The nineteenth century was an important period of innovation within this tradition. Taking their cue from the active, charitable strand of the tradition typified by St Vincent de Paul, a wave of religious founders emerged at that time and set up scores of new orders and congregations. These were devoted to a mixture of social provision and evangelisation both for the poor and the bourgeoisie.

The novelty of this movement rested in part on its scale and on the comprehensiveness and extent of the social services which this scale allowed. It also represented a breakthrough in another important respect — in its new openness to *female* religious and in the consequent

mushrooming of female congregations which occurred throughout the Catholic world during the nineteenth century. The Irish experience was typical in this respect. A number of new female congregations were founded between 1780 and the mid-nineteenth century (most notably the Presentation sisters, the Irish sisters of Charity, the Loreto sisters and the sisters of Mercy), geared to practical teaching and social service work rather than cloistered devotion (see Clear 1987 for an overview). These and a number of other foundations provided the basis for a long-lasting expansion of numbers. In 1800, there were some 200 nuns in Ireland, by 1850, there were 1,500 and by 1900 there were some 9,000. The numbers of male religious and clergy also grew but less spectacularly — the number of priests almost doubled between 1800 and 1900, reaching 3,500 in the latter year (Fahey 1987). The Irish church was somewhat exceptional in that growth in personnel continued throughout the first half of the present century (though even this was not unique — Catholic church personnel in the US also continued to grow rapidly up to the 1960s). In Ireland by the mid-1960s, there about 16,000 nuns in Ireland and some 14,000 male religious and clergy, numbers which made the Irish Catholic church the most heavily staffed of any national church in the Catholic world (Inglis 1987). Parish ministry carried out by clergy occupied less than one in five of these. The balance provided the human resources which formed the foundation of the church's massive role in social provision.

### *Effects on social services*

What effects did that role have on the social services system in Ireland? One considerable effect was to increase the overall level of provision in education, health and related social services. In Ireland, it is often said that the work of the church in these areas simply displaced the role of the state and meant that the church colonised activities which properly should have been provided by the state. While there may be some truth in this view, it should not be overstated. State investment in social provision in Ireland prior to the rapid expansion which took place in the 1960s was not generous. No reserve existed within the public system which could easily have been drawn upon to fill gaps caused by withdrawal or non-activity on the part of the church. State

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provision might have been somewhat greater than it actually was had the church not been as active, but on its own it is unlikely to have risen to the levels achieved by the combined church-state provision which actually evolved.<sup>161</sup>

While the church's social services had an effect in raising the overall level of provision and thus the overall standard of services available to the public, there is little indication that the social services system was more *equitable* as a result. The primary purpose of social service provision for the Catholic church was to disseminate and safeguard the faith, not to combat social inequality or reform society. Arising out of the primary focus on Catholic propagation, Catholic schools and hospitals were structured in such a way as to reflect and to some extent reinforce existing social hierarchies — there were elite schools as well as poor schools and exclusive services for the wealthy as well as broadly provided services for the less well off. The religious congregations themselves incorporated status distinctions into their structures — for example, in the distinction between lay sisters and choir sisters in the female congregations or the status rankings of the elite orders versus the more run-of-the-mill congregations.<sup>162</sup> Many of the religious congregations founded in the nineteenth century to provide services for the poor soon found themselves subject to upward social drift — once their reputations became established they found it difficult to resist the demand from the Catholic middle classes that they expand their services upwards on the social scale. Any potential they might have had for substantial social distribution down the social scale was thus compromised. Those congregations most associated with

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<sup>161</sup> Tussing (1978) pointed out that from the 1950s to the 1970s, Ireland had a reasonably high rate of participation in post-compulsory education — one that was higher, for example, than that in Britain and Northern Ireland, despite the higher level of public funding for education in the latter systems. He points to the role of the Catholic church in providing post-primary schools as one of the factors contributing to Republic's somewhat surprising educational performance.

<sup>162</sup> Echoing these gradations, a former pupil from a Loreto secondary school in the 1960s recalled to me recently how one of the sisters would reprimand unruly pupils by saying, 'Remember girls, you're not factory girls, you're not Mercy girls, you're Loreto girls'.

populist provision, such as the Sisters of Mercy and the Irish Christian Brothers, eventually found themselves oriented more to the lower middle classes than to those at the very bottom of the social scale.

As Catholic social services matured in the first half of the twentieth century, they became more rather than less associated with social privilege and eventually came to form as much an obstacle to the equitable distribution as a means of promoting it. The lack of a genuine redistributive concern in Catholic social provision tended to create a vacuum in services for those at the bottom of the social scale – or at least did little to narrow gaps between the poor and the better off. This evolution also tended to develop a vested interest in the existing system of provision among Catholic service providers. The consequence was that as the state in Ireland began to make sporadic efforts to move towards welfare state supports and services for the poor, the Catholic church often found itself resisting rather than promoting this kind of reform (the role of the Catholic church as an obstacle to redistributive policies on the part of the state in Ireland is extensively argued in Breen *et al.* 1989). An early instance came in the field of health, as the Catholic church came to the support of vested medical interests in fighting off the extension of public health insurance from Britain to Ireland in the period 1912-18 (Barrington 1987). It acted similarly in the course of the long-drawn out struggle over the improvement of the health services which eventually resulted in the Health Act of 1953. In the latter instance, the church's conservatism and apparent lack of a social conscience did considerable damage to its credibility as an agent of Christian concern for the poor.

A similar vitiation of the church's claim to serve the cause of social justice occurred in the field of education. For example, the system of vocational education created by the Vocation Education Act 1930 was designed in part to protect the social standing and exclusiveness of Catholic academic secondary schools and thus helped inflict a status inferiority on vocational schools which blighted their development over succeeding decades. In the 1960s, as the state attempted to rescue the position of vocational education and bridge the gap with secondary education by moving towards a comprehensive, universal system of post-primary education, the Catholic

church again played an obstructive role, particularly in the face of the seminal proposals put forward by the then education minister, Dr Patrick Hillery, in 1963 (Ó Buachalla 1988, pp. 163-66).

A further feature of Catholic social provision which affected its impact on social policy was its overwhelmingly pragmatic character and its consequent lack of an intellectual or theoretical base. Catholic religious congregations which emerged in the nineteenth century were highly successful in developing efficient and effective social services but they neither drew on nor contributed to contemporary developments in social analysis. They added little or nothing to intellectual reflection on social issues and left no mark on emerging academic study in fields like pedagogy or social administration. Out of the thousands of capable men and women who flooded into these congregations over the last century and a half, there were remarkably few who expressed a thought of any lasting intellectual significance about the work they did or the social conditions they confronted. At the level of thought and understanding, therefore, their heritage is strangely empty and this drains their achievement of a progressive, creative dimension which its sheer scale and practical effectiveness would seem to have warranted.

In sum, the Catholic church's role as social service provider, in Ireland as in other countries, was an extraordinary organisational achievement and exceeded anything provided by any other non-state organisation in the western world in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. In advance of the expansion of state provision in the last fifty years, it substantially raised the overall level of services enjoyed by Catholic populations and brought real practical benefit to many people. It also played a role in the development of certain social service professions (particularly nursing) which it is beyond our scope to examine here.

However, its larger impact in the development of social policy and social administration was limited and was less than the practical scale of its social service activity would lead one to expect. This was so largely because social service provision was a means rather than an end for the Catholic church — it was an instrument for the dissemination of the faith,

not a field of endeavour which was worth pursuing in its own right. This evangelising purpose meant that the concern for social redistribution was relegated to second place, if it was there at all. It also meant that intellectual and creative energies were diverted away from a focus on the purpose, methods and philosophy of the social services and social policy as worthy things in their own right rather than as aids to Catholic propagation.

## **Catholic social thought**

It is a reflection of the disjuncture which ran through the Catholic church's role in social policy that, while it threw itself energetically into social service provision from the early nineteenth century onwards, it was only with the publication of the Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1892 that it acquired anything approaching a formal body of social thought. In the social field, thought thus came long after action, and it referred to social issues at such a general level that it had little bearing on the tradition of social intervention represented by the Catholic social services.

The social analysis presented in *Rerum Novarum* and its main successor, *Quadragesimo Anno* (1932) drew attention to the plight of the poor and showed a new awareness of the importance of social deprivation as a concern in its own right and as a factor in sustaining or undermining faith. However, the impact of this social analysis on social policy in Ireland was limited by a number of factors. The first was that it was a construct of the Vatican rather than of the national church at any level. In contrast to social service provision, which emanated from a bottom-up growth of popular new congregations, Catholic social thought was handed down from the olympian heights of Rome, quite often reflecting the personal preoccupations of the pope of the day. While the Vatican's concerns about the ravages of unrestrained capitalism and the plight of the poor undoubtedly chimed with popular concerns throughout the Catholic world, it was nevertheless inevitably remote from local issues within national churches.

This remoteness was particularly notable in Ireland. The central thrust of papal social teaching, which directed at finding a middle way between what the Vatican saw as the extremes of *laissez faire* capitalism and state socialism, had only limited relevance to social conditions in Ireland. Outside of the industrialised north-east of the island, capitalism had failed to take off in Ireland and the socialist movement scarcely developed beyond the embryonic stage. The main targets of attack for Catholic social teaching were thus either weak or largely absent in Ireland — or were present primarily as external conditioning circumstances. Ireland had evolved as a peripheral agrarian offshoot of the capitalist, industrialised economy in Britain and in the process had created a distinct smallholder social structure centred on the non-commercial family farm. Cleavages between landlord and tenant, between large farmer and small farmer, and between native and coloniser were more central to Irish concerns than those between employer and worker or between free enterprise and state regulation. While the Irish bent for the rural and the small scale was highly compatible with the anti-urban, anti-industrial sympathies of papal social teaching, the corresponding forms of social organisation were neither derived in any way from the papal social teaching nor were they adopted as a model of social development which Catholic social thought was prepared to analyse or recommend.

A further feature which conditioned the impact of Catholic social teaching was its tendency towards negativism. It was better at rejecting than recommending, clearer on what it was against than on what it was for. It did not strive to hold out a clear, appealing model of how society should be organised but rather warned about the threats and dangers which it saw in the current situation. *Quadragesimo Anno* came closest to providing an exception to this oppositional orientation as it flirted with a positive social programme. In that encyclical, Pius XI outlined the main features of Mussolini's corporative state in Italy with what he called 'benevolent attention' (Dorr 1992, pp. 79-80) and spoke at length about the merits of vocational organisation and the principle of subsidiarity. However, the programmatic content in Pius XI's social commentary was limited. He hesitated to adopt corporatism as an officially endorsed Catholic model of society and, in raising positive proposals, as Donal Dorr says, he

‘carefully avoids details and specific applications’ and confines himself instead to ‘general norms’ dealing broadly with vocational organisation and the principle of subsidiarity (Dorr 1992, pp. 79-80). The latter norms were used more as means to assess and criticise existing social systems rather than as foundations of an alternative social programme.

In keeping with its reluctance to commit itself to any particular social model, Catholic social thought held aloof from technical analyses of existing social systems. Pius XI defined the church’s role in social teaching as belonging to the moral rather than the technical sphere. This meant that the specialist competence which the church required in order to enunciate social teaching lay in the field of moral theology rather than social science. In consequence, Catholic social thought took no systematic cognisance of economics or any of the other emerging branches of secular social analysis. It was largely indifferent to the increasingly extensive and rigorous empirical examination of social problems and declined to equip itself with the analytic tools necessary to grapple with such forms of enquiry. It thereby set itself on the margins of major intellectual currents then beginning to shape secular thinking about social and economic issues and lost the opportunity either to draw from them or to influence them in a Catholic direction.

Few places were more willing in principle to embrace Catholic social teaching than Ireland, but its actual impact on social policy was smaller than the level of interest and comment it generated would suggest. This was not entirely surprising given the generality and lack of positive direction in Catholic social principles, and the lack of relevance to Irish conditions of many of the Vatican’s preoccupations in the social field. Even the Church’s activities in social service provision seemed little touched by Catholic social thought — the religious congregations providing such services acted much the same way after *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* as they had before.<sup>163</sup> The doctrine

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<sup>163</sup> Some papal pronouncements in the social field did have a direct bearing on the role of the church in the social services, but the most important of these, such as Pius XI’s encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri* (1929) on education, had the effect in Ireland of confirming and shoring up what the church was already doing rather than offering a basis for new developments.

of subsidiarity did lead to some resistance on the part of the Catholic church to the expansion of state social service provision, but even that was more intermittent and unsystematic than is often believed.<sup>164</sup>

An rare attempt to define a blueprint for governance based on Catholic vocationalist principles was undertaken by the Commission on Vocational Organisation, which had been appointed by De Valera in 1938 under the chairmanship of the bishop of Galway, Dr Michael Browne. Its report, which was completed in 1943, was strong on criticism of the existing system but its proposals for an alternative were grandiose, uncosted and lacking an air of realism. A smaller effort in a similar direction was presented by Dr John Dignan, bishop of Clonfert, in his pamphlet, *Social Security: Outlines of a Scheme of National Health Insurance* (1944), which grew out of his experience as chairman of the National Health Insurance Society. While confining its attention to health insurance, Dr Dignan's pamphlet echoed the report of the Commission on Vocational Organisation in being severe in its criticisms of existing provision while being fanciful and speculative in proposing an alternative. Both documents, in J. H. Whyte's words, were 'intellectually undistinguished documents', they were received unsympathetically both in the cabinet and the civil service (some ministerial responses to them were scornful) and did more to expose the poverty of Catholic social thought in Ireland than to influence policy (Whyte 1980, pp. 103-6).

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<sup>164</sup> Thus, for example, while the church's role in opposing the government's Mother and Child Scheme in 1950-51 has been dwelt on at length, less attention has been given to the broad welcome (or at least acceptance) which it simultaneously accorded the 1952 Social Welfare Act. See Keogh (1996) for a useful account of the diversity of views within the Catholic church on the state's role in social matters.

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## The 1960s and after

The 1960s brought a double transition in the Catholic church's role in the social field in Ireland. First, the long expansion in the numbers of Catholic religious personnel came to an end and soon turned into a decline. This turnaround struck earliest and hardest in the religious congregations, both female and male: having begun to fall in the 1960s, vocations to female religious congregations and male orders of brothers quickly collapsed and had dried to a trickle by the 1980s (recruitment to the diocesan clergy held up for a good deal longer — Weafer 1988). The consequence today is that the religious congregations have dwindling and rapidly ageing memberships and some have begun to plan for their own demise. The process of disengagement from the schools, hospitals and other services which they built up in over the previous hundred years is now well underway. This process typically has two stages — first a withdrawal by religious personnel into administrative and managerial positions and then an orderly exit in which they are sometimes strive to retain links or influence of a vestigial kind with the institutions they leave behind. As this movement has become general throughout the Catholic church in Ireland, the consequence is that the role of the church as mass provider of social services is fast coming to an end.

### *The 'option for the poor'*

As Catholic strength in social service provision began to fade in the 1960s, Catholic social thought entered an extraordinary period of ferment and development. The accession of Pope John XXIII in 1958 and the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962 were key markers of the start of this phase. Its high-point was the conference of Latin American bishops in Medellín in Colombia in 1968 and the eruption of liberation theology into the consciousness of the international Catholic church. Concepts of solidarity with the poor and marginalised, of 'conscientisation' of the masses and of confrontation with secular authority in the cause of social justice which were espoused in Medellín electrified those in the Catholic church who were impatient with old conservatism. John XXIII had abandoned traditional

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Catholic suspicion of the welfare state and had adopted a hopeful view of what capitalist development could do for human kind. The Latin American experience took many in the church a step beyond this optimism, including John's successor, Pope Paul VI. Paul's encounters with the reality of Third World poverty in Latin America and with the daring of liberation theology had radicalised him to a degree previously unknown in Rome. He hesitated to endorse the scepticism about 'development', the call to confrontation and the 'option for the poor' with which Medellín had challenged the church worldwide. But his pronouncements (particularly his apostolic letter, *Octogesima Adveniens*, which marked the eightieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*) did endorse the view that social problems required political solutions and also required that the church be guided by local wisdom and the precise nature of local social circumstances in deciding what form local political solutions should take (Dorr 1992, pp. 205 ff.).

The changes in Catholic social teaching wrought by Medellín and Paul VI's responses to it were as much about method and the nature of the church's teaching authority as about content. They reflected a view that social teaching should not emerge from on high by way of deductions from broad, Vatican-ordained social principles. Rather, they should emerge from the 'signs of the times' as evident in local or regional circumstances. Since Rome could not read the signs of the times around the world, this approach also meant that local and regional voices could be authoritative in determining the proper course for the Catholic social action to follow in particular regions — just as the Latin American bishops had done at Medellín. Since local and regional voices from around the world could not all be expected to say the same thing, this in turn allowed for variation and flexibility in Catholic teaching in place of the old claim to universal validity. Thus a whole new set of principles entered Catholic approaches to social questions. Attention was directed downwards to local circumstances rather than upward to general doctrines, teaching authority on social issues devolved to some degree from Rome to those in touch with local circumstances, and regional diversity was allowed for in place of the old universality and uniformity. The very notion of Catholic social

thought as a unitary, general and universally valid set of principles, laid out in Rome and handed down to the faithful everywhere, was implicitly abandoned and replaced by a more fragmentary, variable and democratically sensitive approach.

## **Social justice and the Irish Catholic church**

While the new departures on social justice which emerged during the pontificate of Paul VI have since generated conservative counter-reaction within the church, they have left their mark everywhere in the Catholic world, not least in Ireland (for a good general account, see Fuller 2002, pp. 213-224). A noticeable shift towards left of centre took place in the Irish church in the late 1960s and 1970s, the empirical analysis of Irish social conditions, with a particular focus on issues connected with poverty and underdevelopment, began to be pioneered under church auspices (the discipline of sociology was initially established in Ireland by priests), and Irish bishops adopted a more consistent focus on issues of social justice in their pastorals (as reflected especially in the joint pastoral, *The Work of Justice* 1977).

Two institutional developments in the Irish church can be pointed to as indicative of these developments, both of which in their own way reflect a new growth emerging out of old traditions.

### *Trócaire*

The first was the founding of Trócaire in 1973, the Irish Catholic church's agency for Third World development. Set up as a trust by the Irish conference of bishops, this was a response to the call by Paul VI and the Third World church for a concerted Catholic championing of the poor and the marginalised. Trócaire quickly became Ireland's largest non-governmental agency in the field of Third World development and, since non-governmental development aid was relatively strong in Ireland, it became a significant actor in the world of international aid.

Trócaire has a number of strong links with the mainstream Catholic church. As an episcopal trust, it is under the general control of the bishops and is viewed within the diocesan church as an important form of institutional witness to the gospel message. It also is rooted in a very practical fashion in an element of traditional Catholic ritual practice — its main means of fund-raising (and one that has proved highly successful) is the Lenten collection, which is run in conjunction with parishes and Catholic schools throughout the country. This collection gives a new form of expression to the old tradition of ritual self-denial during the Lenten period (and as such appeals especially to children). At the same time it gives Trócaire the life-blood of substantial popular subscription.

While Trócaire is thus clearly a Catholic agency, it nevertheless marks such a radical break with past traditions of Catholic social action that its Catholic identity is blurred, in wider public perception if not within the church itself. For one thing, in its work overseas, it is careful to present itself as a determinedly non-missionary organisation — its purpose is development, not Catholic propagation. In stark reversal of traditional priorities, its work in the field is drained of any overt Catholic message, and its inspiration in Catholic thinking is held firmly in the background. While it works cooperatively with Irish missionary agencies in developing countries, it maintains a strict non-missionary identity.

The secular nature of its mission is reflected in its personnel. It is staffed by lay people, hired for their professional expertise in development work rather than for their devotion to the faith. This in turn reflects the conviction that the organisation's worth lies in its technical competence and commitment, not in its denominational colour.

In all these ways, Trócaire has moved far outside the mould of traditional Catholic provision of social services and in its day-to-day work has merged in with the style and structures of its secular counterparts. This is not to say that its foundations in Catholic social teaching have been lost, but rather that its work is designed as a form of Christian witness for the existing institutional church rather than as a means of expanding the reach of the church or winning converts.

### *CORI*

The second institutional development I want to point to here is the collective forum for social action which has been created by the religious congregations under the umbrella of CORI, the Conference of Religious of Ireland. This organisation was founded originally as the Conference of Major Religious Superiors in 1960, at which time it played a largely defensive, obstructive role designed to protect church interests in social provision. Today it brings together some 135 member congregations incorporating more than 10,000 personnel in 1,200 locations around the country. Some of its members continue to regard it as a rearguard defensive mechanism, designed to protect as much as possible of the congregations' influence in the social services as their numbers decline and their hold weakens.

For other members, however, it has provided the platform for a re-grouping and re-direction of the congregations' efforts, as required by the dictates of the new Catholic thinking on social justice. This has occurred particularly under the auspices of CORI's Justice Office for which the cause of solidarity with the poor requires a lesser emphasis on mass social services for a society increasingly well-endowed with secular provision and a more concerted focus on the plight of the marginalised. Furthermore, Christian solidarity with the marginalised requires not simply the provision of services, along the lines of the congregations' traditional role. Rather it requires a challenge to the structural causes of poverty and social exclusion, the articulation of detailed alternatives and peaceful struggle to bring these alternatives into being. This role requires it to maintain an interest in education and health services, the main traditional preserves of its membership. However, this interest is increasingly directed at shaping those services from outside rather than at mainstream involvement in their delivery. It also extends into a wider range of areas such as unemployment, poverty, taxation and public spending, discrimination, community participation in decision making and so on.

While this radical wing of CORI might be thought of as the parallel within Ireland of the overseas development work carried on by

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Trócaire, it differs from Trócaire in a number of respects. First, it is in the form of a conference rather than an active agency and its main focus is on the development of policy rather than on implementation. Its focus on policy sometimes involves it in devising and testing out new forms of service provision (such as the Part-time Job Opportunities Programme which it piloted in the 1990s) but these are transitional activities designed to influence state policy rather than to provide new fields of activity for the church itself.

Secondly, as an organisation of religious rather than of the hierarchy, it is somewhat removed from the popular pastoral links of the diocesan church. It has no popular outreach along the lines of Trócaire's Lenten collection, though it has made efforts to engage lay people around the country in its work through a system of regional associations and networks. Its material base lies in the resources which have been accumulated by the religious congregations rather than in direct popular subscription. It is thus somewhat less constrained by popular conservatism in the stances it adopts on social issues (though a degree of conservatism in its own membership means that it is far from entirely free in this regard).

However, despite these differences, many of its operational methods echo those of Trócaire. It relies heavily on technical expertise in the fields of economics, sociology and social administration as a basis of its influence — it aims to speak to policy makers in their own language and at a level of competence which matches anything the public policy system can throw up. It often draws on lay professionals to provide that expertise, and does so without undue regard for their religious outlooks. The central secretariat which carries out this analytical function is small and its capacity for technically sophisticated analysis and lobbying is organisationally precarious given its dependence on certain key individual personnel (measures to increase the number of religious with the necessary skills and experience have been undertaken in recent years). Yet, it is capable of offering a sustained, technically sophisticated critique of social and economic policy. This critique is informed by the new Catholic thinking on social justice, but

it relies on detailed technical analysis of real conditions rather than on an appeal to theology as its source of authority.

### *Effects*

The effects of the new Catholic approach to social questions in Ireland are hard to quantify. This is so in part because the new approach is by no means universal within the church. Strong residues of a defensive stance in regard to the powers and privileges of the church are still present and these sometimes work at cross-purposes to the social justice mission. However, the authority and standing of the church have been thrown behind a large part of the new agenda and these amount to substantial moral backing for the cause of social justice. In spite of the church's weakened position in Ireland today, its stance on these issues continues to carry considerable moral weight. At a minimum, the attention it has focused on social justice issues has helped to keep them on the table in national debates about policy development. Neo-liberal doctrines calling for a freeing of the market and the rolling back of the state have not succeeded in pushing these issues to margins in Ireland, as they have done in some other countries. While there may be many reasons for this, the counterweight offered by church support for a social justice perspective is undoubtedly one.

This effect also operates beyond the level of general doctrine. The technocratic dimension of the church's work on social issues has also given it a role in shaping the details of policy. It is significant in this regard, for example, that CORI Justice is included in the community and voluntary pillar which was added to the national partnership process in September 1996. This gives CORI a direct role in the partnership negotiations which have played such a central part in shaping both the details and the general evolution of public policy. In this it acts not as a defender of the institutional interests of the church but as a representative of the marginalised groups to which the community and voluntary pillar is intended to give a voice.

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## Conclusion

The Catholic church's role in social policy has experienced a major transformation in the last thirty years. Prior to the Second Vatican Council and the upheavals of the 1960s, it had built up a massive presence in the delivery of social services. However, despite its scale, the impact of Catholic social service provision on the evolution of social policy was more limited than one might expect. This was largely because social services were designed to propagate the faith rather than influence social distribution or shape the secular ordering of society. As a result, the church did not subject them to the continuous quest for improvement in purely social terms which would have made them into a more dynamic element of social provision.

In contrast to the strength of the church's presence in social service provision, the church's formal social teaching was often vague and didactic and its positive effects on social policy are hard to discern, in Ireland or elsewhere. While serving to maintain a general concern for the poor in Catholic teaching, it was too unwilling to grapple with specifics and recommend solutions to serve as an inspiration to sustained action.

The pre-1960s pattern of strong social provision and weak social thought has been reversed in the decades since then. Catholic social provision has declined in the face of a rapid fall in the numbers of religious, but Catholic social thought has become more assertive, sharp edged and committed to the cause of social justice (even though there may be less than complete unanimity within the church on the desirability of this development). It has also become more empirical and technocratic in its methods of analysis, and more geared to influencing public policy at a detailed technical level as well as at the level of general principle. Its strengths as a constructive critic of the state's social policies have helped counter-balance the severe set-backs to the church's moral authority that have flowed from the scandals and revelations of abuse of recent years. In earlier decades, massive numbers of church personnel were deployed to deliver social services,

but they had little creative impact on thinking about social issues. Today the massive numbers are quickly shrinking, the system of Catholic social services is in decline, and the church itself is on the defensive for its failings in the past.. However, the new models of Catholic social action that have been created suggest that smaller numbers, concentrated and deployed at the cutting edge of social policy, can have a substantial impact on the shape of future developments in the field of social justice.

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