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“What the Gay Marriage Vote Reveals about Catholic Attitudes in Ireland”

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Last week, Ireland voted overwhelmingly to legalize gay marriage. The vote was 62 percent to 38 percent, with all but one district voting in favor. Rural as well as urban districts, senior citizens as well as young people voted for legalization.

Most United States' news reports celebrated the vote's positive side, the gay community's happiness, and the way the vote unified nearly all sectors of Irish society. But there is a darker side. Since Ireland is 84 percent Catholic, the vote is seen as an overwhelming rejection of the Catholic Church. This is not surprising. In the last 30 years, weekly Mass attendance in Ireland has dropped from nearly 90 percent to less than 20 percent.

Why this sudden change? It is largely due to the revelation of three horrific practices of the church. As each one came to light, Irish Catholics at first disbelieved but gradually accepted that the church had failed them.

First is the priestly sex-abuse scandal in which a few priests raped and molested hundreds, even thousands, of children over decades. While the acts of these priests were bad enough, church officials in Ireland, as in the United States, failed to halt these crimes. Instead, they covered up the deeds and moved the perpetrators to new places. Rather than removing these criminals, the church enabled them.

Second are the revelations of the church-run state orphanages and reformatories, where rather than being loved and cherished, children routinely were beaten, abused and raped. The Irish government's 2009 Ryan Report found that thousands of children in these institutions, run by nuns and monks, were often terrorized. According to the report, "ritualized beatings were routine" in girls' facilities, and rape and molestation were "endemic" in boys' facilities.

The Irish church and religious orders have refused to assist in investigations, have denied the revelations and shown no remorse or contrition.

Third are the facilities for unmarried mothers. Since the late 1700s, unmarried mothers were sent to so-called "Magdalene" laundries, where they worked as unpaid laborers cleaning clothes. Sometimes they spent their entire lives in the institutions. The last laundry was not closed until 1996.

There also were mother-baby institutional homes around Ireland. Both types of institutions were rife with abuse, beatings and a lack of human decency. Hunger and filth were rampant, and the nuns regularly treated their charges in a degrading fashion.

Furthermore, since 1993, authorities have uncovered more than 4,000 bodies in unmarked graves, including 800 in a sewer near the home in Tuam, that were disposed of by these homes and laundries. The lack of human decency indicated by such treatment and the continuing refusal of religious institutions to provide any information about them has angered the Irish people immensely.

These practices by the Catholic Church in Ireland that have come to light have robbed the church of its moral authority in the eyes of its parishioners. So it is not surprising its teachings about homosexuality were ignored in the vote on gay marriage.

But there is a silver lining. Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin observed after the vote, "We (the church) have to stop and have a reality check ... I ask myself, most of these young people who voted yes are products of our Catholic school system for 12 years. I'm saying there's a big challenge there to see how we get across the message of the church."

Actually the Catholic Church got its message across just fine. In Ireland, the church runs more than 85 percent of the schools, and in those schools it teaches about Christ's love, that all people are equal before God, and that all sins can be forgiven. For decades it has taught its students the principles of how to be good, how to love "your neighbor" and how to follow a moral and upright life.

The Irish took the principles of love and equality before God and applied them to the question of gay marriage. The Catholic attitudes they learned in school helped them decide that gays should be allowed to marry, just like everyone else.

This attitude of equal treatment for all people, including gays, is not unique to Irish Catholics. Catholics in many parts of the world are in favor of gay marriage. In America, polls since 2010 have shown that a majority of Catholics accept gay marriage, more than any other Christian group. And, as Frank Bruni pointed out in his New York Times essay of May 27, 2015, many Catholic countries already have adopted gay marriage, including Spain, Portugal, France, Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina.