

Review



A heavy cross to bear

Overworked and understaffed – how some priests are risking burnout

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In depth

‘One Saturday, we had a funeral, a wedding, a first communion and then mass. It was too much..’

As the number of priests dwindle and their workload soars, Ireland’s ageing clergy are under increased pressure. **Sarah Mac Donald** talks to two priests about their day-to-day life and the mental health struggles faced by clerics as they head into a busy Easter schedule

‘**W**hen my mother died, I had to ring around to try and find a priest to cover for me. I know priests who went back to work the weekend after the death of their mother or father because there was no one to cover for them,’ Fr Tim Hazelwood says.

His mother died three years ago. Priests in Ireland today face an increasingly heavy workload due to a significant decline in vocations. Compassionate leave is contingent on finding a cleric to carry out your pastoral duties in your absence. “Most guys are doing the role of two or three priests in the past,” he explains.

The 67-year-old, who is the parish priest of Killeagh and Inch in Co Cork, highlights the challenges facing priests through his own health mishap. “I suffered two fractures in my hand, but I had to get back to work within five days. A teacher in the same boat would have been entitled to six weeks’ sick leave. And nobody asked ‘can we help you?’” A healthy life requires holidays. But according to Hazelwood, some priests take no holidays. “We laugh and say, ‘sure they love being a priest!’”

“But the truth is, they are sick of begging for cover. Some take holidays from Monday to Friday only and never get a full week’s break because they can’t get cover for the weekend.”

Last November, the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP) gathered in Athlone and heard concerns about older priests, some well into their 70s and 80s, being asked to take on increased responsibilities due to the decline in priest numbers. Requests to elderly clergy must take into account their health, well-being and right to rest, the ACP stressed. However, many bishops find themselves between a rock and a hard place. They are constrained by a lack of vocations and a diminishing priesthood, but parishioners are often unwilling to travel distances for mass and refuse to countenance church closures.

“Bishops are saying they won’t be closing parish churches, that would be the last resort. So the health of the priest comes after that,” Hazelwood chides.

A survey for the ACP in 2022 found that 547 of the 2,100 working priests in the Irish Church were aged between 61 and 75. Nearly 300 (or 15pc) were 75 or over. A quarter will retire over the next 10 to 15 years.

According to the survey, across all Irish dioceses, fewer than 52 priests were younger than 40, and last year, just 13 men began studies for the priesthood at the national seminary in Maynooth.

The declining fortunes of the church in Ireland are manifesting themselves through overworked and stretched priests, many of whom are working well beyond retirement age. Overwork and isolation have serious repercussions for priests’ mental health. A 2020 French survey found that even though the majority were happy in their ministry, 17.6pc of them suffered from depression, more than three times higher than the general population.

The first-ever survey of well-being among Australia’s priests found clergy commonly faced stress (65pc), lack of sleep (49pc), anxiety (44pc) and loneliness or isolation (43pc). Several interviewees reported feeling overwhelmed by heavy workloads. Some described themselves as workaholics or felt pressured to work beyond healthy limits, with a few experiencing burnout.

“The fellas suffering depression would say they’re happy as priests because it gives them meaning in life. But when the balance isn’t right, and they can see no end to the demands on them, it can result in depression,” Hazelwood says. That can then spill over into serious mental health challenges and even suicide. According to Hazelwood, the ACP is “very concerned about the rate of depression and we are wondering about the outcomes and what that means in human terms for the priest”.

The life of a priest has changed in recent years and the expectations on them are huge. “You have a few institutions such as schools, the church and the parish centre; there are property issues and insurance. You’re responsible for all of those,” he says.

In addition to funerals, weddings, baptisms, and all the sacraments, there are governance, finance and safeguarding matters to be seen to as well as the management of parish volunteers in choirs, cleaning and flower arranging.

“If somebody in the church behaves badly, it’s up to you to check that and it’s not easy because it can lead to conflict. The bottom line is, if anything happens, it’s the priest that has to take responsibility,” Hazelwood says.

Priests, he stresses, are “defined very much by our work, in the sense of ‘once a priest, always a priest’. You don’t just switch off”. Dealing with

traumatic incidents like road fatalities or a suicide is left untreated and is “never processed”, he says. “When petty things happen in the parish, it can be triggering.”

Parish politics are very difficult, he underlines, especially when change is happening. “People don’t want their church to lose a service, and it’s not the bishop who gets the hassle, it’s the priest on the ground who faces it. Many elderly priests are not able for this highly pressurised role but they’re being asked to do it.”

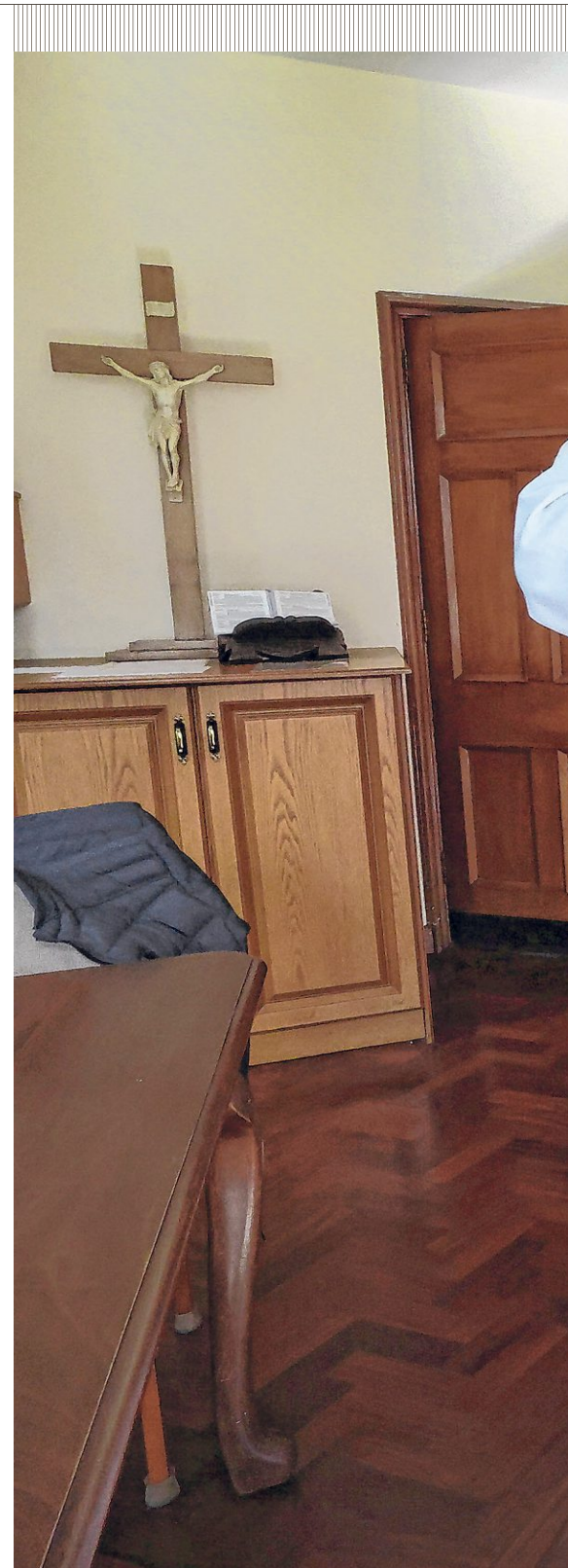
A PRIEST AND A CEO

It’s a bright sunny spring day when I call to Fr Joe Mullan, vicar forane of the Donnybrook Deanery of 19 parishes in Dublin. His day-to-day ministry is concentrated on the three-parish partnership of Kilmacud, Mount Merrion and Clonskeagh, of which he is moderator.

Each of these churches can accommodate up to 1,000 people. Preparations for Palm Sunday are getting under way as I arrive. The week ahead will be chock-full of Easter ceremonies – one of the busiest times in the liturgical year for priests. It rolls in after a myriad of confirmation ceremonies for local schools. There are 11 primary and post-primary schools in Mullan’s parish partnership to be ministered to, and there will be little time for him to rest on his laurels post-Easter, as first communions get under way.

Before the baskets in the Church of St Thérèse containing the palms for Palm Sunday and 800 crosses can be set out for the children’s mass on Saturday, Mullan has three baptisms to perform for babies Molly, Leah and Grace. The assembled parents, godparents and families hail from Lithuania, Canada and, of course, Ireland. Baptism will see the three children “welcomed into the family of faith,” Mullan tells them. In today’s church, he may never see any of them again, and so he provides a gentle catechesis, cajoling responses and using some humour to engage all in the ceremony.

Despite the joy of the occasion, it is a demanding ceremony for Mullan and he adjourns to his nearby house for a cup of tea before he starts his preparations for the next ceremony. He became the parish moderator in 2019, following in the footsteps of the much-loved and hugely inspiring Fr Tony Coote, following his untimely death in August 2019 from motor neurone disease. At a time when Mullan’s peers are retiring, the 65-year-old’s workload is increasing as he man-



Editor: Ben Haugh
ben.haugh@independent.ie

Cover: Fr Joe Mullan.
Photo: Frank McGrath

Production by
Gareth Murray
and Adam Lacey

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“All through my ministry, everything has been diminishing: the numbers at church, the numbers in seminary, and the numbers who participate”

A day in the life: Clockwise from left, Fr Joe Mullan prepares at St Laurence O’Toole church before a Christening; ironing at the parochial house in Mount Merrion; and with three-month-old Ben and his parents after mass. Photo: Frank McGrath

joined Clonliffe College seminary (which shut in 2000) against the backdrop of the euphoria of John Paul II’s 1979.

“We minister in a time of less,” he says. “All through my ministry, everything has been diminishing: the numbers at church, the numbers in seminary and the numbers who participate. It has also been ministry in a time of huge social upheaval compounded by the fall-out from the abuse scandals.

“We don’t have the same grip on the life of people that we had when I was a teenager. We’ve a much lighter touch now and we’re much less inserted in lives.”

His observations are borne out by Census 2022 figures which showed that the proportion of the population who identified as Catholic dropped from 79pc in 2016 to 69pc in 2022. People aged 25 to 29 years were less likely to be Catholic (53pc) than other age groups. This was also the age cohort with the highest proportion of people with no religion (26pc). In the 1980s, over 90pc of people in Ireland identified as Catholic.

FINANCES

This articulate pastor recently underwent knee replacements, which put him out of action and placed demands on the parish team in his absence. A quintessential ‘self-starter’, had priesthood not been his calling, there is no doubt Mullan would have had a high-flying career. When he stepped down over 20 years ago from his €28,000 a year role as director of Accord, the Catholic Marriage Support Agency, his lay successor’s salary was €75,000.

“If you ask me about the future of the church, finance is going to play a huge part in the reconfiguration going forward.” This, he explains, is because the contributions to pay priests’ salaries predominantly come now from an older cohort of the faithful. Younger people might give a one-off donation after a baptism or wedding but rarely donate to the Common Fund.

Though his role is in many ways comparable to that of a CEO, he is first and foremost a priest. “Pastoral ministry was always my fundamental and primary call,” he says.

He relies on 14 staff who help him in the running of three churches, two parish centres and the buildings and maintenance responsibilities. The parish centres are big operations in themselves. Mount Merrion’s centre has 75 user groups, seven days a week. In the sacramental sphere of his role, part-time sacristan Shubert Laxina from the Philippines is his right-hand man and he has no housekeeper. “Like everyone else in the community, I shop, cook, eat, keep the house clean and do endless washes myself.”

He is helped in his pastoral duties by three elderly priests, one newly ordained priest and some younger priests from Africa and India.

When Mullan began in this role, the three parishes provided 104 masses a month. As only a priest can say mass, that meant a priest had to be available 104 times a month. “We have reduced that a little bit now,” he says.

The area he finds most challenging is funerals. “What you can’t anticipate is how intense the funerals might be. They can come in with only 48 hours’ notice in the middle of busy periods. I’ve had weeks with three or four funerals and that means many of the other tasks don’t get done,” he says. “There’s a big emotional quotient in a funeral. Every funeral is an engagement with a life story, a family in grief and sometimes they are very simple, sometimes desperately complicated.”

Admitting he often feels “overwhelmed”, the taxing schedule takes a toll not just on the priests but also on his sacristan. “On one particular Saturday, there was a funeral in the morning, and a first communion, a wedding in the afternoon, and then six o’clock mass. It was too much for him,” he says.

Fr Mullan takes Tuesdays off to recharge, and it usually involves a game of golf. However, sometimes he gets criticised for not prioritising pastoral duties over personal time. “We get one day a week off – we have to be able to unplug,” he says.



ages multiple parishes and juggles increased administrative and sacramental responsibilities.

This summer, Mount Merrion parish is embarking on a major renovation of its sports hall. It needs a new roof at a cost of €300,000. It will take a huge fundraising drive. Mullan shows me the fundraising leaflets he designed and illustrated. Among the bundle, there is also an information leaflet he designed setting out the schedule of Easter ceremonies across the three parishes. Outside Mount Merrion church, he has just erected a newly designed set of Stations of the Cross for local schoolchildren. All that work was done before the church’s boiler broke down on Friday, upending his timetable for the introduction of new tap-and-pay terminals.

“The regulations and the information needed for money laundering purposes take up an enormous amount of time,” he says. “Alongside that, we’re in the middle of a child protection audit, changing from one child protection volunteer leader to another. I’m busy all day, every day.”

Although he has served as a priest in Dublin for 40 years, his northern roots are still apparent when he speaks. He hails from Annalong in Co Down. While accountancy was on his horizon as a career, he felt drawn to the priesthood and