

Article for the Sunday Independent

Ministers who lost their positions.

It is a strange irony that Lucinda Creighton and Derek Keating, both Fine Gael **TDs**, who voted in opposite lobbies on the Government's Protection of Life in Pregnancy Bill, should, on that account each face the loss of a ministry that was dear to their hearts.

Lucinda Creighton, as is well known, lost her ministry, her membership of the Fine Gael parliamentary party, her Dail office, and was informed that she would be deselected as a Fine Gael candidate for the next general election, because she voted against the legislation.

Meanwhile, Derek Keating, a back bench TD for Dublin Mid West, was informed by his parish priest that by reason of his vote for the government legislation he was to stand aside as a Minister of the Eucharist in his local parish church.

Each erstwhile "minister" had, it seems, gravely offended the relevant political or ecclesial magisterium to the point where forfeiture of ministry was the condign and inevitable consequence of his or her vote.

While the fate of Lucinda Creighton attracted a good deal of media coverage and a fair share of public sympathy, Derek Keating found himself receiving no sympathy in the editorial column of the Irish Catholic.

He was criticised there for bringing his loss of ministry to the attention of the public via the media rather than attempting to discuss the matter with his parish priest.

The Irish Catholic editorial also made the point that Derek Keating should hardly be surprised if he was removed from Eucharistic ministry for opposing Catholic teaching when he apparently accepted without any difficulty the sacking of his colleague, Lucinda Creighton as a consequence of her vote.

The editorial also stated:

“The last thing that practising Catholics who cherish the sacredness of human life want to see when they attend mass is the spectacle of those who vocally support abortion distributing Holy Communion”.

Vocal support for abortion? Deputy Keating? Truth? Christian charity? Hmm.

Meanwhile on an ultra-orthodox Catholic blog called “Protect The Pope”, contributors were exulting in the fate of Deputy Keating’s ministry. Compliments were abundant for the parish priest, Father Reilly, who had taken the step of removing the TD from his ministry.

That blog makes very interesting reading. It even features on its homepage a clock-type box in which the time which has now elapsed since when Enda Kenny, in the view of the blog Master, “should have been excommunicated” is continually calculated in terms of months, days, hours, minutes and seconds.

In his recent major interview, Pope Francis seems to be opening up the church to new directions and priorities. He said:

“We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that. But when we speak about these issues, I have to talk about them in a context. The teaching of the church, for that matter, is clear and I am a son of the church, but it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time.

The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church’s pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. Proclamation in a missionary style focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things: this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus. We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the gospel.”

These comments, however, are a million miles away from formally abandoning the church’s well-known positions on abortion, gay marriage, and the use of contraceptives.

To the old rhetorical question, “Is the Pope a Catholic?”, the answer is and remains undoubtedly “Yes”.

But nonetheless the Pope’s statement concerning the “likelihood” of the moral edifice of the church falling like a house of cards in the absence of a “new balance” is, in my view, of huge significance.

This Pope clearly understands that the strident and obsessive concentration by elements within the Roman Catholic Church on reproduction and sexuality is a very real threat to the survival of the church as an institution.

Unless that new balance is struck soon, the Roman Catholic Church is quite likely in my view to simply mutate into a narrow, highly centralised orthodoxy commanding an ever dwindling membership practising an atavistic faith in an increasingly isolated space. Without the new balance, the road to implosion is plainly open.

It seems to me that the starting point in church renewal must be a fundamental reconsideration of the disastrous course taken by the papacy in *Humane Vitae*. That encyclical not merely wounded the church; it caused an infected wound which simply will not heal. It is poisoning the church. It discredited - and still discredits - the church as a moral community.

Confession of the error of that encyclical would not weaken the church; it would strengthen it. While such confession might cause a problem for those who are tied to a 19th-century view of the church's magisterium, it could do wonders for the revival of the church as a community of the people of God.

Likewise, the obsessive preoccupation of the papacy with securing a totally phoney external conformity within the Western church's ranks on the issue of priestly celibacy is, I think, repugnant to the great majority of thinking Catholics.

How priestly celibacy squares even with Paul's First Letter to Timothy is one of the great mysteries of faith. How the church survived for a millennium without priestly celibacy is another mystery. Why it can still do so in certain eastern parts of the church is yet another.

That obsession is also part of a piece with the other obsessive doctrines on sexuality and reproduction; these obsessions not merely alienate the would-be faithful, they undermine the credibility and integrity of the institutional church itself. They are surely the "cards" of which much of the "house of cards" of the church's "moral edifice" is now composed.

The attitude of churches and of religions to women is also part of a wider context. Change is afoot.

So perhaps, as in the case of the two former "minister" TDs, there are some striking parallels between politics and religion. The term "house of cards" is apt in both contexts. A new balance is possible in both arenas. Reform is not a dirty word any longer. The consequences of opposing reform become clearer as time passes. ENDS