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Pope Francis versus Mary McAleese and Marie Collins: The 2018 Papal Visit to Ireland and the Role of Abuse in the Decline of the Catholic Church

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Pope Francis versus Mary McAleese and Marie Collins: the 2018 papal visit to Ireland and the role of abuse in the decline of the Catholic Church

Gladys Ganiel 

ABSTRACT

This article analyses Pope Francis's visit to Ireland in 2018, arguing that the way the Pope was portrayed in the media and received by the public confirms that clerical child sexual abuse scandals continue to be a significant contributing factor to the decline of the Catholic Church. This conclusion is reflected in the narrative analysis of the way the *Irish Times* covered Francis's visit. It reveals that abuse was the most pervasive theme in its coverage. It also considers coverage of the engagement of two important national figures with the papal visit: former President Mary McAleese and abuse survivor Marie Collins. They were positioned as alternative Catholic role models and moral authorities who were critical not only of the Church's handling of abuse, but also of the way it treats women and LGBTQI people. A nationally representative survey after the visit revealed that a majority thought Pope Francis had not done enough to address abuse during his visit and that the visit was not a healing time, neither for victims and survivors nor for LGBTQI people. The failure of the Church adequately to address the abuse crisis continues to be a decisive factor in what appears to be its continuing (institutional) decline.

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Introduction

In August 2018, Ireland hosted the second papal visit in the history of the State. Pope Francis travelled to a country that just a few decades previously had been considered a stronghold of Catholicism, with levels of religious practice and belief that exceeded most other countries in Europe. This historic image of a 'holy Catholic Ireland' resonated with memories of the first papal visit of John Paul II in 1979. Millions turned out to see John Paul II in seven different locations, including an outdoor mass that attracted a third of the population of the State and a quarter of the population of the island.¹ But nearly four decades later, Francis's visit seemed less a celebration of faith than a trial about the Catholic Church's handling of clerical child sexual abuse.

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The reason for Francis's visit was to participate in the World Meeting of Families (WMOF). The WMOF is an international gathering of the Catholic Church designed to provide pastoral care and spiritual encouragement for families. It has been held in different locations every three years since 1994. Yet, as Francis's visit approached, media coverage centred on the abuse scandal in the Church, including calls for Francis to apologise for abuse and the way the Church had handled it.

This article analyses Francis's visit to Ireland, arguing that the way the Pope was portrayed in the media and received by the public confirms that the abuse scandals continue to be a significant contributing factor to the decline of the institutional Church. This conclusion is reflected in the narrative analysis of the way a major national daily, the *Irish Times*, covered the visit. The analysis reveals that abuse was the most pervasive theme in its coverage. It also considers coverage of the engagement of two important national figures with Francis's visit: former President Mary McAleese and abuse survivor Marie Collins. The *Irish Times* positioned them as alternative Catholic role models, who were in tune with an emerging 'liberal' Catholicism that is critical not only of the Church's handling of abuse, but also of the way it treats women and LGBTQI people (Ó Féich and O'Connell 2015). The centrality of abuse to the way people evaluated Francis's visit was further confirmed by a nationally representative survey commissioned by the author after the visit. It revealed that a majority thought Francis had not done enough to address abuse during his visit and that the visit was not a healing time—neither for victims and survivors nor for LGBTQI people.

The article begins by analysing the decline of the Catholic Church between papal visits, highlighting the media's coverage of abuse scandals as a significant factor. It outlines the methods of the study, before presenting a narrative analysis of the coverage in the *Irish Times* of McAleese's and Collins's engagement with Francis's visit and the survey results. While recognizing that the reasons for the decline of the Catholic Church in Ireland are multiple and complex, the article argues that the failure of the Church adequately to address the abuse crisis continues to be a decisive factor in what appears to be its ongoing (institutional) decline.

The decline of the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church's historical dominance of political and social life in Ireland is well-established (Fuller 2004; Inglis 1998; Whyte 1980). During centuries of colonisation and dominance by the British Empire, which often framed its mission in terms of spreading Protestant civilisation, the majority of people on the island maintained their allegiance to Catholicism. The Irish War of Independence led to the establishment of an Irish Free State in 1921, with six counties with a Protestant majority remaining in the UK. The State

entrusted the Church with extraordinary power in education and health, enforced censorship, and ensured that Catholic teachings were reflected in public discourses and the laws of the State.

The State's early economic policies were protectionist and agrarian. To some extent this reflected Catholic social teachings which were cautious about industry, entrepreneurship, and capitalism. This has led some to conclude that the Catholic Church stunted the new State's economic development, which delayed modernisation in comparison to other parts of Europe (Fanning 2008, 155–159; Garvin 2005, 51–53; Inglis 1998, 75–76). While Ireland was not a 'theocratic' state, it was a state in which the Church enjoyed more power than other civic and religious groups (Moran 2019, 174–176; Whyte 1980, 376). Tom Inglis (1998) goes so far as to argue that the Catholic Church had created a 'moral monopoly', described as an all-encompassing Catholic *habitus* that disciplined people's actions and behaviours. Ireland also had a clerically dominant Church and a Catholic culture obsessed with sexual sins (Ferriter 2009).

Measures of devotion were high at the time of John Paul II's visit. More than 90% of the population identified as Catholic, with weekly mass attendance between 87% and 91%.² By the 2016 Census, 78% identified as Catholic and 12% identified as having 'no religion' or indicated 'not stated', an increase from 8% in 2011 and 6% in 2006.³ Weekly mass attendance dropped from 79% in 1991 (see <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/irish-census.html>, accessed 30 July 2018) to 36% in 2016 (Quinn 2017). Between the European Values Surveys in 1981 and 2008, Pádraig Ó Féich and Michael O'Connell found "small but steady" decline in the importance people placed on religion in their lives and in those who identified as religious; they also found that belief in a personal God fell from 77% to 66%, while belief in a spirit or life force rose from 15% to 24%. Belief in life after death, heaven, hell, and sin declined, although not as much as belief in a personal God (Ó Féich and O'Connell 2015, 237–238). Catholics also reported significant decline in the level of confidence in the Church, especially between 1990 and 1999—the decade when details of abuse became widely known (ibid, 240). Finally, Ó Féich and O'Connell documented the emergence of 'liberal' Catholics, whose beliefs on homosexuality, euthanasia, divorce, taking 'soft drugs', abortion, and prostitution diverged from Church teachings. In 1981, just 14% of Catholics could be considered slightly liberal/liberal/very liberal by their measures, but, by 2008, this had risen to 45% (ibid, 243). This growing liberalisation was reflected in significant changes in legislation: contraception was legalised in 1980, restrictive laws on divorce and abortion were overturned in referendums in 1995 and 2018, and, in 2015, Ireland became the first country in the world to approve same-sex marriage in a referendum.

Many factors contributed to these declining trends, which are bound up in wider processes of modernisation: growth of the economy and prosperity, which was rapid during the 'Celtic Tiger' boom of the 1990s and early 2000s;

the changing role of women in society; changes within Catholicism itself, which experienced some liberalisation as a result of the Second Vatican Council (Ganiel 2016, 34–39; Fuller 2004, 109–123). Other scholars have emphasised the important role of the media (Donnelly and Inglis 2010; Inglis 2000; Fuller 2004, 127–138). The media had cautiously begun to shake off the shackles of censorship and deference to the Church and had assumed a more critical role, for instance, in their coverage of the Second Vatican Council, 1962–1965 (Donnelly 2016). Susie Donnelly and Inglis (2010) describe how the media, especially television, also worked to undermine traditional Catholic piety by championing images of lifestyles of self-indulgence rather than self-denial, contributing to a wider liberalisation of society. Such changes opened the way for frank reporting of clerical sexual abuse scandals. Donnelly explores the coverage of Bishop Eamonn Casey’s affair with an American divorcee in the early 1990s, describing it as the first significant “direct challenge by the media to the moral and symbolic authority of the hierarchy” (Donnelly 2016, 325). During the following decade, the media became the dominant source of information about the abuse of children by priests and the moving of offenders from parish to parish. Coverage of the abuse has been described as contributing to a “national trauma”, played out in media reports of State inquiries (Regan 2013, 161). Donnelly and Inglis consider the media’s role so central that they argue that it “replaced the Catholic Church as the social conscience and moral guardian of Irish society” (Donnelly and Inglis 2010, 1). Also, the media were harsh in the way they drew the image of the Church:

What was crucial in the media reports . . . was that the Church was depicted as evil. It had moved from being regarded and treated by the media as a sacred, almost untouchable institution to one which was profoundly profane. Within a period of ten years, the media abandoned its policy of non-interference in Church affairs and regularly depicted the Church as a public enemy. In making this move towards depicting the Church as a profane rather than sacred institution, the media moved beyond simply reporting and documenting secularisation to becoming an agent of change. (Donnelly and Inglis 2010, 14)

Donnelly and Inglis further observe that measures of decline accelerated in the 1990s, concurrent with the reporting of the abuse scandals. According to European Values Surveys, in 1999, “Ireland had . . . the lowest levels of trust in the church than . . . other Catholic European countries [Malta, Italy, and Spain]” (ibid, 12). For Donnelly and Inglis, this pointed to a de-institutionalisation and privatisation of religion, a finding confirmed in a wide-ranging study by Helen Goode, Hannah McGee, and Ciaran O’Boyle:

The religious practices of the general public were also somewhat affected by cases of child sexual abuse by clergy. More generally, attendance at religious services has fallen for Catholics in Ireland in the last decade. *Child sexual abuse by clergy appears to have*

had no effect on public faith in God. The findings indicate that, for the public, institutional religion was not synonymous with a belief in or a personal relationship with a God. (Goode, McGee, and O’Boyle 2003, 201, emphasis added)

This decline in the authority of the Church as an institution has contributed to the development of a ‘post-Catholic Ireland’, a term used to signal that a particular form of Irish Catholicism has been displaced and that the institutional Church is no longer held in esteem by many, including practising Catholics (Ganiel 2016, 4–5; Maher and O’Brien 2017, 1–19). The Catholicism that has been displaced had a monopoly on religious life, was a defining characteristic of national identity, had a strong relationship with State power, elevated the status of priests to exceptionally high levels, and emphasised the evils of sexual sin.

It is impossible to disentangle the media’s role in exposing abuse from other factors which contributed to the decline of the Church in Ireland. It is important to note that the media have been considered an important factor in exposing clerical abuse in other countries, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with arguably similar knock-on effects in terms of decline of trust in Church institutions and religious practice (Jenkins 2001). The role of the media in other countries must be considered alongside variables, such as the Catholic Church’s more centralised structure compared to other Christian denominations and religions and the “organised institutional power” of bishops to silence victims, which make the Catholic Church an easier target for litigation (Rashid and Barron 2019, 564). Litigation itself attracts media coverage (Steinfels 2016, 434). Thus, internationally, media coverage of abuse has focused disproportionately on the Catholic Church, which some scholars have attributed, in part, to the “anti-Catholic cultural frame of the media” in countries with an historic Protestant majority (Rashid and Barron 2019, 574; Jenkins 2003). Ireland cannot be characterised by an historically ‘anti-Catholic cultural frame’; indeed, Faisai Rashid and Ian Barron point out that “it was only in Ireland, a culturally Roman Catholic country, that clerics have least been held accountable before the secular legal system of the nation-state” (Rashid and Barron 2019, 574). This is due to a generous indemnity agreement with the Irish State. The media have reported on the Church’s lack of financial contributions, possibly contributing to the perception that the Church has got off too easily in terms of providing compensation to victims. In addition, Philip Jenkins (2001, 106–107) argues that the Catholic media have played a major role in exposing the abuse internationally, with both liberal and conservative factions within the Catholic media attempting to use the scandals to advance their own agendas. The internal Church squabbles have been picked up by secular media, intensifying the focus on the Catholic Church. In Ireland, leading

Catholic figures like McAleese and Collins have been profiled in both secular and Catholic media, lending further weight to Jenkins's observations. In sum, it can be concluded that the media's role in the decline of the Catholic Church in Ireland has been significant. This is not unusual internationally, even if historically Protestant countries may have been building on long-established anti-Catholic stereotypes.

Methods

The original aim of my research was to investigate the so-called 'Francis Effect' through the lens of the papal visit (Ganiel 2020). The 'Francis Effect' is the idea that Francis has renewed Catholicism and improved the image of the Church worldwide (Giordan 2020; Zylstra 2018). Francis's visit presented an opportunity to 'take stock' of the Catholic Church in Ireland, raising questions about whether Francis's supposedly positive pontificate could begin to stem, or even reverse, decline. While I had expected that the abuse crisis would impinge on the papal visit, it was not immediately clear to me that abuse would become such a defining feature of it.

I used two methods to analyse Francis's visit. Firstly, I undertook a narrative analysis of the coverage in the *Irish Times* of the build-up to and the events of his visit. With a circulation of nearly 78,000 between its print and digital formats, the *Irish Times* is the second largest newspaper in Ireland. I favoured a print media source over electronic and audio-visual media sources because I thought it would provide greater depth for narrative analysis. I could have chosen other outlets, such as the national broadcaster RTÉ, online news sources like thejournal.ie or the *Irish Independent*, which has a circulation of 93,000, making it Ireland's most popular newspaper (Slattery 2018). The popularity of the *Irish Independent* compared to that of the *Irish Times* is in part due to the latter's historical roots as the newspaper of the (Protestant) Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, even though this is an association that has passed.

My analysis began on 1 May 2018 and continued until the weekend edition of 1 September 2018, which was published one week after Francis's visit. I monitored the frequency of stories mentioning Francis and identified issues and themes related to his visit. I had access to the *Irish Times* through a searchable database in my university library, which featured online images of the print edition. I used the search term 'Pope Francis'. This turned up stories in addition to those about the visit, although these were a minority. Over the period under review, 314 stories featured Francis (21 in May, 21 in June, 16 in July, and 256 in August and on 1 September). They included contributions from readers on the letters page. I identified six main themes in the stories: the abuse crisis (in Ireland and internationally), the role of women in the Catholic Church,

the role of LGBTQI people in the Catholic Church, the logistics of the visit (what the Pope was doing, how people could get to events, road closures, etc.), citizens' personal perspectives on Francis and his visit, Francis's personality. I also noted the character of accounts featuring McAleese and Collins, whose engagement with the papal visit received significant coverage.

Abuse dominated coverage. In the month of August, 46% of the articles (including readers' contributions on the letters page) featured the abuse crisis, overshadowing stories dealing with the other themes.⁴ The tenor of the stories was highly critical. Ultimately, I focused on McAleese and Collins because their perspectives were significant in reports concerned with the wider themes of 'abuse crisis' and 'women' and, in McAleese's case, the 'LGBTQI' theme. Accordingly, I coded McAleese and Collins as significant 'sub-themes' within stories featuring the wider themes. They were presented as practising Catholics whose expressions of faith were positive alternatives to Francis and the institutional Church; their words seemed to carry extra moral authority—or, at the very least, made the points that *Irish Times* writers wished to emphasise. Indeed, one *Irish Times* story quoted Noreen Lynch, a laywoman from Dublin, who clearly set the authority of the two women above that of the institutional Church:

I would say I'm a practising Catholic, it matters to me. It doesn't mean I think the institution, the system, is great. . . I would stand with people like Marie Collins and Mary McAleese who would be saying "we are better than this". (Power 2018)

The *Irish Times* commissioned a national opinion poll about Francis's visit, with results published two days after he had left (Leahy 2018): 55% said Francis had not gone far enough to address abuse during his visit, 31% said he had gone far enough, 14% had no opinion.⁵

Secondly, I commissioned a nationally representative survey about Francis's visit. Because my analysis of the *Irish Times* had convinced me of the continued importance of the abuse crisis, the survey included questions about abuse and Francis's handling of it. My survey was also designed to explore a potential 'Francis Effect'—in other words, to investigate if or to what extent Francis had changed Irish views of Catholicism for the better. I considered the 'Francis Effect' 'measurable' in terms of changes in people's perspectives on the Catholic Church and changes in their religious practice since Francis became Pope as well as changes in perspectives and practices since his visit. My questions were included in a regular monthly omnibus survey conducted by the Irish company Amarach, which was carried out in mid- to late September 2018.

***Irish Times* analysis**

Two weeks before Francis was due in Ireland, a report on abuse and cover-up in the Catholic Church by a grand jury in Pennsylvania, USA, was published. This was a major international story; the revelations were so damaging that Francis issued a pastoral letter on 20 August: “Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God.” On 21 August, the *Irish Times* printed the full text of Francis’s letter and published four articles about it, which were largely critical (McGarry 2018a). At this point, it had not been confirmed that Francis would meet survivors during his visit. This was announced only four days before his arrival—a belated commitment that the *Irish Times* linked to the Pennsylvania story (Clarke 2018).

The WMOF ran during 21–26 August, with Francis’s visit encompassing the final two days, Saturday and Sunday. Saturday included attending the President’s residence, a civic reception with the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and other dignitaries, Dublin’s Catholic Cathedral, the Capuchin Fathers’ Day Centre for the homeless, and a private meeting with eight survivors of abuse. Francis also rode through Dublin in the ‘pope mobile’ and spoke at the WMOF’s “Festival of Families” event in a large sports stadium. Sunday morning, he flew to Knock to visit a famous shrine. He returned to Dublin for mass in Phoenix Park, the same location that John Paul II had used.

Francis addressed abuse in three ways: in his speech at the civic reception; in his private meeting with survivors; by asking for forgiveness during the penitential rite at the mass in Phoenix Park. In his speech at the civic reception, Francis said that “the Catholic Church’s failure to address the ‘repugnant crimes’ of clerical sexual abuse ‘remains a source of pain and shame’” for Irish Catholics (Carswell 2018). Francis’s private meeting with survivors, including Collins, was billed as a time for listening. Afterwards, some survivors revealed to the media that Francis had called those who covered up the abuse of children *caca*, which the translator said meant “filth you would see in the toilet” (McGreevy and Burns 2018).

Francis’s pleas for forgiveness at the mass were influenced by his meeting with survivors. They were specific to the Irish context and widely regarded as unprecedented, going farther than apologies by other Church authorities. The *Irish Times* printed almost the full text of Francis’s words on page two:

We ask for forgiveness for those places of exploitation of manual work, that so many young women and men were subjected to. . . In a special way we ask pardon for all the abuses committed in various types of institutions run by male or female religious, and by other members of the church. . . We ask forgiveness, for the time that as a church we did not show the survivors of whatever kind of abuse compassion, in the seeking of justice and truth, and concrete actions. . . We ask forgiveness for some members of the church hierarchy, who did not take charge of these painful situations and kept quiet. We ask for forgiveness for all those single mothers who were told that to seek their

children that had been separated from them . . . that this was a mortal sin, this is not a mortal sin. (Power and Carswell 2018)

Below, I analyse coverage of McAleese's and Collins's engagement with Francis's visit, describing how their perspectives were presented as critiques of Francis's and the Church's handling of abuse and, in some cases, how they seem to be depicted as superior sources of moral authority.

Mary McAleese

McAleese served two terms as President, Ireland's ceremonial head of state (1997–2011). She is a remarkable figure in Irish life, embodying the struggle and heartbreaks of the country over the last generation. She is from Northern Ireland and, during the Troubles, sectarian violence forced her family to leave its home. Her brother suffered for years at the hands of Fr Malachy Finnegan, who has been revealed as one of Ireland's most notorious abusing priests. Her son is openly gay and she has spoken about the way the Church's approach to LGBTQI people has made her family feel unwelcome. Yet she remains a committed Catholic, writing the headline contribution in a recent book urging reform, *Five Years to Save the Irish Church* (McAleese et al. 2018). In 2018, she earned a doctorate in canon law from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

As Francis's visit approached, McAleese emerged as perhaps Ireland's most prominent critic not only of the Church's handling of abuse, but also of Church teachings. On 23 June, the *Irish Times* reported why she did not plan to attend the WMOF: it had "become a political rally rather than a religious and spiritual experience" (McGarry 2018b). In contrast to Francis and the Church, McAleese was presented as a champion of human rights and freedom:

. . . former president Mary McAleese said she would like to see the Catholic church 'stop hurting' LGBTQI people and women. Speaking at a meeting of We Are Church [a reform group], she said she hoped the church would become 'a champion of complete diversity and inclusion'.

Ms McAleese said she had voted in favour of repealing the Eighth Amendment [prohibiting abortion] and had no intention of going to confession over it. "Times have changed. And one of the things that has changed is our understanding of our human rights. Among those human rights: freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, freedom of opinion, freedom of religion, freedom to change religion", she said.

(Handly 2018)

McAleese's voice was also among those urging Francis to meet with survivors. She said:

They found time to go Knock, which is a whole morning even though he's only going to be there for eight minutes or so. A time was found for that and I think time has to

be found somewhere because these are people who have been overlooked, neglected. (McGarry and Kelly 2018)

But where *Irish Times* writers seemed to emphasise McAleese's moral authority the most was in opinion pieces reflecting on her media appearances, like Kathy Sheridan's account of listening to an interview with McAleese on RTÉ:

As Mary McAleese deftly drew the corrupt global connections together and wound them all the way back to the Vatican in a powerful RTÉ interview last Saturday, dropping in a potted history of the World Meeting of Families and calling it a “right-wing rally” en route, I stopped the car to listen. The last time I did that was when the IRA announced its August 1994 ceasefire.

As Mary McAleese spoke her mind on Saturday, the parallels were striking. How many innocents' lives have been destroyed in the reckoning? How much of society's fabric has been coarsened, torn, destroyed? (Sheridan 2018)

Three days before Francis's arrival, RTÉ television had aired a programme called “Mary McAleese's Modern Family”. McAleese visited families across Ireland, including a ‘blended’ family whose partners had children from previous relationships and a gay couple who had adopted a son. McAleese celebrated the love in these families and affirmed them as valid expressions of marriage, commenting that the Church had something to learn from them. Peter Crawley's review was effusive:

Here is a former president, arriving unescorted to a family home in Co Meath, an approachable authority figure greeted with reciprocal honesty and good humour, not timidity and deference.

Throughout the programme, you get a sense of a nation's hard-won confidence, its myriad different family structures, and their right to be recognised. McAleese, a trenchant critic of religious intolerance, is nonetheless remarkably even-handed in assessing the role of spirituality and the church in modern Ireland.

(Crawley 2018)

McAleese's prominence became so pervasive that a poll by the *Irish Independent*, conducted ahead of Francis's visit, included a question that asked people whether they agreed with her criticisms of the Catholic Church: “Former president Mary McAleese has been critical of the Catholic Church, stating that it does not treat women equally. Do you agree with Mrs McAleese or not?” The coverage of the poll revealed that 55% agreed with her that the Church did not treat women equally, with 15% not in agreement, 15% stating “it depends”, and 15% stating they did not know. Two thirds supported her views in favour of female priests and priests being allowed to marry (Corcoran 2018).

Marie Collins

As a teenager, Collins had been sexually abused by a priest. She told her story publicly in the 1990s. She has become one of Ireland's most respected campaigners for justice for survivors and child protection, helping to set up a depression support group and serving as a trustee of "One in Four", one of Ireland's most prominent advocacy/counselling groups. Like McAleese, she remains engaged with the Church, helping the Archdiocese of Dublin establish its Child Protection Service in 2003. In 2013, she was appointed by Francis to the Pontifical Council for the Protection of Minors, which developed procedures for the Church to deal with abuse. Francis approved the Council's recommendations but was prevented from acting on them by the Curia, which governs the Church. Collins resigned in frustration in 2017.

On 7 August, the *Irish Times* printed a full opinion column by Collins, titled "Pope Must Admit Disregard for Lives of Abused". She trenchantly took Francis to task:

What is needed to restore some respect for the church and to give struggling Catholics hope, is for the pope to admit responsibility. He should do so on behalf of the church for the part played by the hierarchy and the Vatican's systemic obsession with secrecy and canon law—which showed a total disregard for the lives of the abused people concerned—in all of this.

He should admit the responsibility the Vatican and church leadership hold for past events in Ireland and set out how he is going to deal with the abuses happening today in other parts of the Catholic world. He needs to do more than make promises. He must commit to action.

(Collins 2018)

Collins was among those quoted in critiques of the "Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God", with one journalist citing her Tweet:

Statements from Vatican or pope should stop telling us how terrible abuse is and how all must be held accountable. Tell us instead what you are doing to hold them accountable. That is what we want to hear. 'Working on it' is not an acceptable explanation for decades of 'delay'. (Hilliard 2018)

Collins also spoke with reporters following the private meeting between Francis and survivors:

She raised issues of accountability and child safeguarding and asked why the church still allows disgraced church leaders to resign instead of being fired. 'I made the point to him that they're allowed to resign, which means that there's no outward sign of any finding of guilt against them and if they are found guilty in some sort of church tribunal, that they should be made known and he agreed, that it should be more transparent', she said. (McGreevy and Burns 2018)

However, when speaking with reporters on the plane back to Rome, Francis appeared to dismiss Collins's concerns by commenting that she was

“fixated” on tribunals. *Irish Times* journalists were quick to defend Collins, with Breda O’Brien writing:

It was beyond frustrating to hear Pope Francis say on the plane back to Rome that he loved Marie Collins, herself a survivor of clerical abuse, but that she was “fixated” on a particular mechanism of accountability for bishops.

Francis must give due process to and then fire bishops found guilty of cover-up, in order to show that even belatedly, the Church understands that nothing except the whole truth will do.

I can think of two names for any lay-led commission of investigation—Marie Collins and Nuala O’Loan [a former police ombudsman in Northern Ireland], both women of courage, compassion and unwavering integrity.

(O’Brien 2018)

Collins’s perceived moral authority was succinctly captured by Patsy McGarry:

Marie Collins speaks for the vast majority of Irish Catholics in this matter and she has far more experience of dealing with the issue than Pope Francis has, and alongside Church authorities too. She knows what she is talking about. Bishops and religious leaders who cover up the abuse of children should know they face removal if they dare place the welfare of the church, themselves or their priests before that of a child.

[...] Pope Francis argued that such a tribunal may not be nuanced enough to deal with the variety of complex international cultures. No one doubts his sincerity or personal commitment to dealing harshly with the “caca”, those who cover up abuse, but what happens when his papacy comes to an end? Such an important matter should not be left to anybody’s discretion. It must be placed beyond trust and the personal and be institutionalised in a structure, a tribunal.

Marie Collins is right. Pope Francis is wrong.

(McGarry 2018c)

‘Marie Collins is right—Pope Francis is wrong’ was also the headline of McGarry’s story. This headline seemed to convey Collins’s status as an alternative, and superior, moral authority on the matter of abuse.

Survey results

The survey confirmed that most people thought Francis had not done enough to address abuse during his visit and that it had not been a healing time for victims/survivors and LGBTIQI people. It also revealed that a sizeable minority stayed away from events associated with the visit due to their disapproval of the Church’s handling of abuse. It found that practising Catholics, defined as those who attend religious services at least once a month, differed from everyone else in their opinions on all questions. Of the respondents, 35% of the women and 32% of the men were practising Catholics. In questions designed to evaluate the ‘Francis Effect’, a sizeable minority of practising Catholics

revealed that Francis's pontificate (39%) and his visit (30%) had changed their opinions of the Church for the better and increased their religious practices, with 16% praying more, 13% trying to be more kind and merciful to family and friends, and 12% attending religious services more often (Ganiel 2020, 351–353). People under 35 were also somewhat more favourable than the general population about Francis's pontificate (27% of those aged 18–24 and 32% of those aged 25–34) (Ganiel 2019, 267). This points to evidence of at least a partial 'Francis Effect' among practising Catholics and younger people (Ganiel 2019, 2020, 353–354). There were differences between men and women on some questions, which will be noted below.

The survey was conducted three to four weeks after the visit. This was close enough to the visit for it to be still fresh in people's minds, but may have been long enough to give people time to reflect on it. Amarach, the company that conducts the omnibus, regards questions about religion as 'sensitive'; therefore, people could opt out of my questions. The sample of those who answered them was 840. There were weighted quotas set on gender, age, and region, aligning with the national population based on the Census of 2016. Social class quotas were based on the calculations of the Association of Irish Market Research Organisations.⁶ Northern Ireland was excluded. The survey was completed online, which may have limited its reach among some demographics, particularly older and economically disadvantaged people.

Of the respondents, 64% identified as Catholic, 14% lower than the 78% recorded in the Census of 2016. The next largest category was 'no religion' at 19%—higher than the 10–12% in the Census. The remaining were 'Other Christian' (6%), 'Church of Ireland' (5%), 'Other Religion' (4%), and 'prefer not to say' (1%). It is possible that people of 'no religion' were more likely to choose to complete the survey, expressly to convey their dissatisfaction with religion. This seemed to be the case in a survey of religion in Ireland which I conducted in 2009 (Ganiel 2009, 17–18).

Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with seven statements about Francis's visit (Table 1). One statement asked whether Francis had done enough to address abuse: 48% indicated he had not gone far enough, 30% said he had gone far enough, and 22% chose neither/nor or no opinion. Practising Catholics differed from everyone else on this question: just 28% said Francis had not gone far enough, with 50% indicating that he had gone far enough. There also was a difference between men and women: 52% of men said he had not gone far enough, compared to 45% of women.

When asked whether the visit was "a healing time for victims and survivors of clerical sex abuse", 36% disagreed and 31% agreed; when asked whether it was "a healing time for LGBTQI people and their

Table 1. Perceptions of Francis's visit (% respondents).

	Agree	Disagree	Neither/ nor	No opinion
It was good for Ireland as a nation. Overall N=840	48	26	23	3
It was good for Ireland as a nation. Practising Catholics N=206	75	8	16	*
It was good for the Catholic Church in Ireland. Overall N=840	50	21	26	3
It was good for the Catholic Church in Ireland. Practising Catholics N=206	73	7	18	1
The Pope went far enough during his visit to address child sex abuse in the Catholic Church. Overall N=840	30	48	19	3
The Pope went far enough during his visit to address child sex abuse in the Catholic Church. Practising Catholics N=206	50	28	21	2
It was a healing time for victims and survivors of clerical sex abuse. Overall N=840	31	36	21	3
It was a healing time for victims and survivors of clerical sex abuse. Practising Catholics N=206	54	23	21	2
It was a healing time for LGBTQI people and their families. Overall N=840	23	40	32	5
It was a healing time for LGBTQI people and their families. Practising Catholics N=206	37	21	37	6
It will revive faith in Ireland. Overall N=840	24	46	28	2
It will revive faith in Ireland. Practising Catholics N=206	47	20	32	*
It was as important as the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1979. Overall N=840	32	45	19	4
It was as important as the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1979. Practising Catholics N=206	54	29	16	1

The categories Disagree and Agree contain and combine the qualifiers "slightly" and "strongly".

families", 40% disagreed and 23% agreed. Again, practising Catholics differed: 54% agreed that it was a healing time for victims and survivors (23% disagreed); 37% agreed it was a healing time for LGBTQI people (21% disagreed). Still, overall, the most popular view was that the visit was not a healing time for victims and survivors and LGBTQI people.

The survey also asked whether respondents had attended events and why (not) (Table 2). Overall, 80% had not attended events. Of those, 51% had not attended because "I was not interested" and 30% had not attended because "I disagree with how the Catholic Church has handled child sex abuse". There were some differences between men and women, with men more

Table 2. Reasons for not attending an event (% respondents).

I did not attend because ...	All N = 676	Practising Catholics N=129	Other Catholics N=301	Non- Catholics N=85	No Religion N=153	Men N=328	Women N=348
I was not interested	51	22	52	52	73	55	48
I disagree with how the Catholic Church has handled child sex abuse	30	18	31	27	40	27	33
the travel/walk to the venue was too difficult	17	39	17	9	2	15	19
I disagree with the teachings of the Catholic Church	14	2	9	18	34	14	15
I was not in favour of the pope's visit	12	2	10	15	24	11	13
I disagree with how Pope Francis is leading the Catholic Church	7	2	4	13	15	6	8
I was unable to get a ticket to the event	4	5	4	6	1	3	5
I was at work/out of the country	3	8	3	4	1	4	2
I attended an event protesting Pope Francis's visit instead	1	0	1	1	2	2	1
the weather was poor even though I had a ticket	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

The figures do not add up to 100 because people could select more than one option.

likely to say they were not interested (55%, 48% of women) and women more likely to say they disagreed with the way the Church had handled abuse (33%, 27% of men). Of the practising Catholics, 37% had attended events. For practising Catholics, the top reason they had not attended was that the travel/walk was too difficult (39%), followed by lack of interest (22%) and disagreement with the way the Church has handled abuse (18%). Among those with 'no religion', 73% were not interested and 40% disagreed with the handling of abuse. Thus, apart from practising Catholics, indifference outweighed indignation about abuse as a reason for not attending, although abuse is still the second most significant factor.

Finally, the survey asked four questions designed to gauge the 'Francis Effect'. These questions found that practising Catholics and younger people seemed more susceptible to a partial 'Francis Effect'. The first question was: "Has your opinion of the Catholic Church changed since Francis became Pope in 2013?" There was no change for 66%, but 22% said their opinion had become more favourable. Among practising Catholics, 39% said their opinion had become more favourable, with 57% saying it was unchanged. Among those aged 18–24 years, 27% were more favourable and 54% were unchanged. The 25–34 age group was the only one more changeable than the 18–24 group, with 32% more favourable and 53% unchanged.

The second question was: "Has your opinion of the Catholic Church changed since Pope Francis visited Ireland?" Overall, 74% (66% of practising Catholics, 64% of 18–24-year-olds, 62% of 25–34-year-olds) said their opinion was unchanged, while 16% (30% of practising Catholics, 19% of both 18–24-year-olds and 25–34-year-olds) said their

opinion of the Church had become more favourable since the visit and 11% (4% of practising Catholics, 17% of 18–24-year-olds, 12% of 25–34-year-olds) stated their opinion had become less favourable. These answers indicate at least a partial ‘Francis Effect’, in that sizeable minorities of the general population, practising Catholics, and those under 35 reported more favourable opinions of the Catholic Church since Francis became Pope and since his visit. Men were also more likely to report positive change in their perceptions of the Church: 25% of men versus 20% of women said their opinion of the Church had become more favourable since Francis became Pope, while 19% of men versus 14% of women said their opinion of the Church had become more favourable since Francis’s visit.

The two other questions about the ‘Francis Effect’ asked about religious practice: “Has your religious practice changed as a result of Francis becoming Pope in 2013?” and “Do you anticipate that your religious practice will change as a result of Pope Francis visiting Ireland?” Respondents were given a range of options and could tick all that applied. For most, religious practice had not changed (63%) and would not change (63%); these figures are similar to those of practising Catholics (64% since Francis became Pope, 62% after the visit). For practising Catholics, the top three ways in which religious practice had changed or would change (ranging from 16% to 12%) were praying more often, being more kind and merciful to family and friends, and attending religious services more frequently. Younger people were also more likely to report changes in practice: just 47% of 25–34-year-olds and 46% of 18–24-year-olds said there were no changes. Among these age brackets, the most popular change was praying more often (15% of 25–34-year-olds, 12% of 18–24-year-olds). They also anticipated attending religious services more often (10% in both age brackets versus 5% overall) and going to confession more often (10% of 18–24-year-olds and 6% percent of 25–34-year-olds versus 3% overall). At the same time, 29% of 18–24-year-olds and 17% of those aged 25–34 identified as having ‘no religion’ (compared to 19% overall). This underlines that, among those under 25, evidence of a partial ‘Francis Effect’ must be considered alongside the relative lack of religious identification overall in this age bracket. There also were gender differences. Men were more changeable in their practices: while 68% of women reported no change, 58% of men did. Similarly, 67% of women did not anticipate any changes, compared to 58% of men.

In sum, while only a minority of practising Catholics say their opinions about the Church or their religious practices have changed because of Francis’s pontificate or visit, it is a sizeable minority. Of practising Catholics, 39% say they have a more favourable view of the Church since Francis became Pope. Indeed, 22% of *all* Irish people have a more favourable

view of the Church since Francis became Pope. These results point to at least a partial ‘Francis Effect’, despite the dissatisfaction with the Church’s handling of abuse and the emergence of ‘liberal’ Catholics who are critical of the Church.

Concluding reflections

Francis’s visit confirmed a deep dissatisfaction in Ireland with the Church and the way it has handled abuse. Even though there are signs that Francis’s positive pontificate has changed perceptions of the Church for the better, my analysis of his visit has revealed that the dissatisfaction extends to Francis’s perceived lack of action. This was apparent in the coverage of the *Irish Times* of two Catholic women who, it is widely known, have tried to change the Church from within: Mary McAleese and Marie Collins. Both were presented as practising Catholics whose efforts to criticise and change the Church for good were consistently rebuffed. They were depicted as alternative moral authorities, superior to the Pope and the institutional Church. My survey further confirmed that the Irish believe that Francis has not done enough to address abuse.

The coverage of the *Irish Times* of abuse around Francis’s visit can be seen as a continuation of the wider media’s unrelenting reporting of the scandals since the 1990s, which has been considered a significant factor in the decline of the Church. There are no signs that the media will change their tone in their coverage of abuse. Unless the Church can adequately address the abuse crisis, it seems its failure to do so will continue to be played out in the media, contributing to its further decline.

Notes

1. The island of Ireland contains two political jurisdictions: the Republic of Ireland, which has had a large Catholic majority since the establishment of the State in 1921, and Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom. About 45% of Northern Ireland’s population identify as Catholic. The churches on the island are organised on an all-island basis.
2. Weekly attendance in 1972 was 91%. The next available data are from 1984, where the figure was 87%. (See <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/irish-census.html>, accessed 30 July 2018)
3. The Census includes categories of lapsed Catholic, atheist, agnostic, and lapsed Church of Ireland, which I added to “no religion” and “not stated”. If only the figures for “no religion” and “not stated” are calculated, the total is just under 10%.
4. Most stories engaged with multiple themes.
5. I compare the results of the *Irish Times* survey with those of my survey in Ganiel 2019.
6. The age categories were 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, and 55+. The region categories were Dublin, rest of Leinster (excluding Dublin), Munster, and Connaught/Ulster. Gender categories were male and female. Social class categories were ABC1 and C2De.

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