

Priest says Ireland losing its faith, needs to be evangelized

DETROIT — Just as St. Patrick evangelized Ireland in the fifth century, an Irish priest studying in Detroit says the Irish of the 21st century now need the new evangelization called for by the late Pope John Paul II.

“I’ll be finishing up here in April, and I’ve pledged to God I’ll go back and evangelize for the rest of my days,” said Vincentian Father Patrick Collins, who is at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit working toward a licentiate in sacred theology with a specialization in the new evangelization.

He wants to not only be a part of that effort himself, but to train other Irish priests to be a part of it.

“If we don’t get with the new evangelism, we could lose in a generation what it took 1,500 years to build and maintain,” Father Collins warned Feb. 28 in an interview with *The Michigan Catholic*, Detroit’s archdiocesan newspaper.

Since 2004, the seminary has offered the licentiate specialization in pastoral theology. The program was developed in response to a call from Pope John Paul that all Catholic ministries and institutions commit their resources to a new evangelization of the church and the world in the 21st century.

Ireland’s increasing prosperity in recent years and revelations concerning clergy sex abuse have been accompanied by falling Mass attendance and vocations. Two years ago was the first time that not even an average of one new priest per Irish diocese was ordained.

Father Collins, 63, paints a stark picture of the state of the Catholic faith and practice in Ireland today.

As recently as 1982, 82 percent of Catholics attended Sunday Mass in Ireland; by 1992, that had dropped to the low 60s. Now, only an estimated 40 percent practice their faith, he said.

For centuries, the Irish, though generally poor, had a reputation for remaining devoutly Catholic, despite sometimes brutal oppression by their English overlords. But Ireland's 1973 entry into the European Common Market, now the European Union, launched the country on an unprecedented course of economic development.

"Ireland has become much more prosperous than I ever thought possible. Americans might not realize it, but Ireland's living standard is higher now than in the United States, and is the second highest in Europe, behind Luxembourg," Father Collins said.

But the country also is seeing signs of the dangers that accompany religious decline, with young people increasingly living together without getting married and many marriages breaking down in divorce.

"Drugs have become pretty prevalent, and suicide rates are frighteningly high," he added.

Father Collins said he welcomes the Irish bishops' decision to move St. Patrick's Day celebrations to March 15, because an early Lent this year causes March 17 to fall on the Monday of Holy Week.

"It would be quite inappropriate to hold it in Holy Week, especially since for many people in Ireland St. Patrick's Day has just become an occasion for binge drinking," he said.

"While people retain a sense of it as a badge of national identity, it has been largely secularized," he added.

For many of Father Collins' fellow Dubliners, observing St. Patrick's Day means attending the parade and then some big sporting event.

"People have much more disposable income now, and (many) fewer people practice their faith. There are people who go to the parade who don't go to church," he said.

"You don't even have many young boys being named Patrick in Ireland anymore; all the traditional Irish names are in decline," Father Collins continued.

“Today, you’re more likely to see a name like Jason. Now, there is a Jason in the Old Testament, of course, but I doubt the parents got the name by reading the Bible — like most of the newly popular names, they got it from some character on a television program,” he said.

During his priestly ministry, Father Collins has taught high school, served as a spiritual director, and taught at the college level at All Hallows College and St. Patrick’s College in Dublin, and at the Milltown Institute, a Jesuit theologate.