

When It Comes to Catholic Church Matters, BC Historian O'Toole is a Clear-Eyed Guide

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BY GREG O'BRIEN
SPECIAL TO THE BIR
James M. O'Toole thrives on clutter. Reams of notes, papers, and research documents are the coin of his domain. Considered the foremost academic authority on the history of the Catholic Church in America, with a dozen books on the subject to his credit, the distinguished professor of history at Boston College sits at his desk in a faculty office building on a steamy July day surrounded by a jumble of work, and laments the creative muddle. "I had lunch today," he says, "with a colleague who spent the day cleaning off his desk at the end of the school year. I was quite envious."

If idle hands are the devil's workshop, O'Toole of the most prolific writers and thinkers at this most Jesuit of universities, labors in a more possessed and celestial realm, with major works on Boston's first cardinal, William Henry O'Connell, the habits of Catholic devotion, race and religion, an upcoming title on the role of Catholicism, and some soul-searching research on the history of sin and confession.

In a far-ranging interview with the *Boston Irish Reporter*, O'Toole, whose family roots trace back to County Cork and County Mayo, talked about his books, his love of teaching, the changing nature of American Catholicism, continued fallout from the Boston Archdiocese's sex abuse scandal, and why Catholics see themselves as sinning less today while ducking the penalty box.

As guilt-prone as Catholics tend to be, particularly Irish Catholics, confession in America (I feel shame-faced for even saying it) is on the wane. In a Boston College Magazine piece entitled "Hear No Evil," O'Toole observes in one of his first works on the subject that the "most striking development in the practice of confession in the US has been its disappearance...and the speed with which it has collapsed."

"Does confession have a future?" O'Toole, who teaches courses on religion in American and American Catholic history, asks. "As a historian, I am more comfortable describing and analyzing the past than predicting the future, but I find it difficult to believe that the long lines at the confessional of earlier times will return. In the modern day, the power of evil is just as strong as it ever was (maybe stronger), but American Catholics no longer understand the world and their behavior in it through the precise distinctions between mortal and venial sins. They are only too fully aware of what Commonweal called 'the ambiguity of evil,' and they resort to many sources of moral

authority—most notably their own consciences—in facing that ambiguity. Even so, for many Catholics, myself included, the disappearance of the traditional form for seeking reconciliation, with God and with our neighbors, has left a gap that has not yet been filled."

"Indeed," O'Toole continues, the preamble 'Bless me, Father, for I have sinned' seems to have gone the way, in some circles, of eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. In a day when we, as a society, continually push the envelope on defining good and evil, are we taking ourselves off the hook? The Baltimore Catechism, if you remember, deems the Sacrament of Penance as the only way to "remit sin and restore the friendship of God by means of the absolution of the priest."

Not one, as an historian, for passing moral judgments, O'Toole says our view of the notion of sin has morphed to more collective transgressions. "What are wrong actions today?" he asks rhetorically, from behind his desk. "What am I supposed to confess? Sin seems to have shifted away from personal responsibility—from 'I pushed my sister' to social issues, like pollution. It's a broader sin, one that is difficult to denounce individually because, for example, a single individual can't control matters like pollution. We used to worry about the right or wrong of kicking the cat, now we worry about racism."

While lines for confession are indeed shorter, there is precedence for it. The early church, O'Toole notes, practiced public penance only at the time of conversion or the time of death. Private, auricular confession, he adds, first emerged in Ireland in the sixth century, and the concept of regular confession was not commonplace in Europe until 200 years later. The Church did not mandate annual confession until 1215. Regular confessions and copping spiritual pleas ("for these and all the sins of my past life") is a more modern-day experience.

Confessions aside, don't write off the Church today, O'Toole says. If Catholics are more reluctant to bare their souls, he adds, they are queuing up in longer lines to receive the Eucharist. "The number of Catholics in this country today receiving Communion has increased dramatically," O'Toole points out, suggesting the Church is slowly weathering its abuse scandal. Compared with Europe, where the number of believers attending church regularly is in the single digits, the Catholic Church in America is in the threes of what might be called a revival. "In the United States, it is estimated that about 30 percent of Catholics regularly practice their faith,"



James M. O'Toole, professor, Boston College

says O'Toole, noting that the number of Catholics in America is growing in part because of increased immigration; while the number of traditional Protestant sect members is in decline.

This development is not to say the abuse scandal is behind the Church, but it offers evidence that the Church body is stronger than the institution or its hierarchy. Contributions are even increasing at many parishes. "Tip O'Neill said all politics is local," notes O'Toole. "I often think all religion is local. Even if Catholics don't like the cardinal or the diocese, they're loyal to their local church." In the wake of the scandal, says O'Toole, those who have decided to leave the Church have left, and those who have remained "have taken the attitude: this is my church, too, and the actions of a cardinal or a number of priests are not going to drive me out! The fallout of the scandal continues, but the crisis of faith, I think, is behind the church."

The face of the crisis, Bernard Cardinal Law, said this in his resignation statement on Dec. 12, 2002: "To all those who have suffered from my shortcomings and mistakes, I both apologize and from them beg forgiveness." Only Law knows if the contrition was taken to confession, but his tenure in Boston was no doubt a failure—one due, O'Toole says, to personal failings and to the failings of a system. "The problem was partly with Law and partly with the system that produced him. He really had no connections here when he was appointed. He had been an undergraduate at Harvard 30 years before, and as far as I know, he had never come back to Boston in the intervening years. So he didn't know anyone here;

work. The domineering O'Connell couldn't corral the hormones of his nephew, the Rev. James O'Connell, whom he had appointed chancellor of the archdiocese. Violating the sanctity of his vows, in 1913 the nephew married a woman in New York, thereafter living a double life and skimming money from the church to support it. The nephew's best friend, Rev. David Toomey, then the editor of the archdiocesan newspaper, the *Pilot*, also married at the same time.

"O'Connell knew of these activities, according to O'Toole, even lied to the pope to protect his nephew," writes Golden. "The author suggests that James O'Connell may have blackmailed his uncle with threats to expose the cardinal's financial irregularities and alleged homosexuality."

To many close observers, it is no surprise the numbers of vocations in the Church have fallen off over the years. Today, the Boston archdiocese ordains about six priests a year, while 20 to 30 priests annually retire or leave the ministry. Do the math, and it doesn't take a scholar to discern that if the Catholic Church in America is to survive, the laity—the subject of a forthcoming O'Toole book—must play a greater role. While it is not likely that women will be ordained or that priests will be allowed to marry any time soon, church services and outreach, O'Toole says, will soon resemble the complexion of Catholic schools where clergy are the exception, not the rule.

O'Toole, now 56, was born in Worcester and raised in nearby Leominster. He says he was an avid reader of history as a child. His father, George, with distant family ties to County Mayo, was a civil servant accountant for the state tax department; his mother, Mildred O'Grady, was a homemaker with family ties to County Cork. They lived a typical suburban existence.

O'Toole first became interested in examining the priesthood and the history of the Catholic Church years after graduating from Boston College as a U.S. history major, studying under Thomas O'Connor, the dean of Boston historians. O'Toole earned a masters degree in history from William and Mary, with a focus on colonial history, then went to work in various libraries and archives, organizing collections and working with researchers in places like the Massachusetts State Archives and the Boston Archdiocese archives. "At some point, I started reading about Catholic history, which seemed to me more interesting and also a discipline where more work needed to be done." From 1986 to 1998, O'Toole taught history fulltime



Bernard Law

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—JAMES O'TOOLE

at UMass before joining the history department at Boston College.

After 24 years of part-time and full-time teaching, he still relishes the role and the significance of his subject. "There are many facets to history," he says. "It's human behavior after all, and humans are complex people. Peeling back all those layers is part of the fascination."

"The history of people and their cultures," he adds, "is like individual memory. Think of what it would be like to have amnesia, to lose your personal memory. Memory is an essential part of who we are and of defining ourselves."

In simple terms, O'Toole defines himself as an observer of events and the individuals who shape them. He is confident in his trade and in his successes, and he's introspective, friends say, almost to a fault. There is no need at the moment for Jim O'Toole to stop off in the confessional. One of the most respected historians in America, he has blanket absolution on retelling the past.

Greg O'Brien is editor and president of Stony Brook Group, a publishing and political strategy company based in Brewster.