Until recently, the Catholic Church was part of the narrative of the lives of Irish people. That narrative must now be rewritten, says Donal McKeown, and that means making sense of what is uncomfortable and difficult.

My first years as a young priest in Belfast in the late 1970s were times of tension and clashing narratives. The story was either that of heroic freedom fighters taking on the oppressive British state, or the virtuous Northern Ireland state resisting the brutal terrorist, or the generous British Government seeking to bring peace.

One well-known example of the power of a narrative stands out in my memory. In 1975, the Birmingham Six had received life sentences for the murder of 21 people. An appeal the following year failed. In 1980 they lodged another appeal against the finding that no police officer had been involved in assaulting them in Birmingham prison. Dismissing the appeal, the Master of the Rolls, Lord Denning, included the following sentences in his judgment:

“If [the six men] won, it would mean that the police were guilty of perjury; that they were guilty of violence and threats; that the confessions were involuntary and improperly admitted in evidence; and that the convictions were erroneous. That would mean that the Home Secretary would have either to recommend that they be pardoned or to remit the case to the Court of Appeal. That was such an appalling vista that every sensible person would say, ‘It cannot be right that these actions should go any further’.”

The story that the highest authorities told about the virtue of all police made it impossible, even for a very senior legal figure, to conceive that the Birmingham Six were anything but guilty. It taught me a lesson about the power of the meta-narrative.

When we tell stories about ourselves – individually and communally – they are not just words about the past but part of who we are. They are the narratives that give meaning to the scattered events of our lives. They provide a filter for what we want to hear. We all hear and read selectively. We are threatened when our story is contradicted.

The story about the Catholic Church that I grew up with was based on a clear and inspiring narrative. The Church stood for truth, for missionary work and for building communities of faith and goodness around the country. It was a story of inexorable growth for the true Church.

But that story also made it hard to believe stories which suggested that some people in the Church were motivated by anything other than Gospel values. It couldn’t be true that there was sexual abuse and domestic violence in good Irish Catholic families. It most certainly couldn’t be true that some priests and Religious were taking advantage of children in brutal ways. That would contradict the story on which I had based so much. But the story that inspired us also limited us. Like any cosy story that we like to tell, it was a partial truth fossilised into heresy.

Now the Irish Church not only has to be sorry for the past and put in place better safeguards for children: we have to retell a truer story.

The Bible tells us that retelling the story is not so much a betrayal of the past but rather a liberating act of wisdom. Throughout the Old Testament, the Jewish people had to revisit their story, seeing disaster not as abandonment but as a call to repent.

The apostles had first to retell the story of Jesus in a way that made sense of his death and Resurrection. Then they had to retell Jewish history to create a narrative that made sense of the Old Testament patriarchs and the sense of Jewish identity. “Spiritual intelligence” is a term found in some management theories. It denotes the ability of individuals and organisations to take the ruffle of the past and turn it into foundations for the future. It means taking a potential millstone and making it into a rock on which to stand.

A new story of the Irish Church will require leadership and poetry, wisdom and holiness. It will include those whose stories did not fit with the old ideology. It will mean repenting of both the sin and the sinful assumptions of the past. That will necessitate space for the poor and afflicted. It will entail seeing the sin of the past not as aberrations in an otherwise perfect system, but as an inevitable failure given the human temptation to pride. It will also involve seeing the present crisis as a time of grace and repentance and not of persecution. It will exclude any sense of pulling up the drawbridge to keep out the attacking hordes. It will mean listening for the voice of God in and above the cry of the media and our critics.

A key task of leadership in the Irish Church is to make space for those uncomfortable voices who will bless us with prophetic wisdom, to enable us to tell a new story that includes and gives sense to even the most painful parts of the past and sows seeds of hope for the future. Resurrection offers the possibility of a new liberating story to both guilty and hurt, to individual and institution.

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