Culture
Book Reviews

A view of Ballaghaderreen, County Roscommon, Ireland, in 2008 includes the Cathedral of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Nathy. (Wikimedia Commons/Sean Cunniffe)

by Jason Berry

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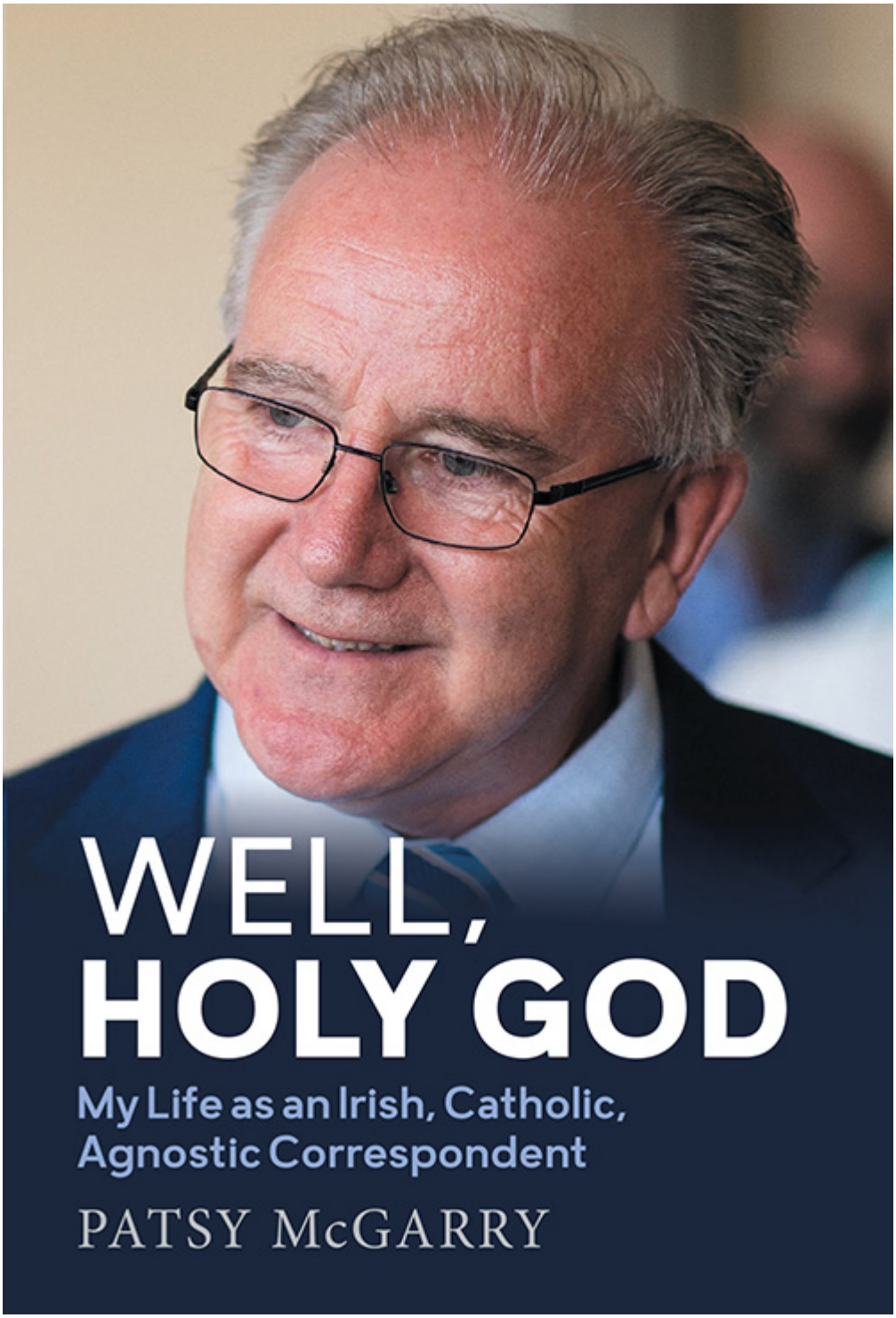

Well, Holy God: My Life as an Irish, Catholic, Agnostic Correspondent
Patsy McGarry
304 pages; Merrion Press

The longtime Irish Times religious affairs correspondent Patsy McGarry is a conscience of Ireland. In *Well, Holy God*, McGarry writes of many topics, notably three decades of sex abuse cover-ups and state investigations, staining the careers

of bishops and cardinals, elevating survivors as national figures, jolting the sense of Irish identity.

"All churches, all religions, are essentially tribal," McGarry writes in this self-searching narrative. "At their best they act as a repository for the higher moral and spiritual values of their tribe, which they carry from generation to generation."

At worst, the tribal psyche concealed a criminal sexual underground of clerics abusing youths and religious sisters tyrannizing girls in reform schools, two searing narratives that arose in the 1990s, thanks to documentaries on state television, and investigative reporting by McGarry and others to whom he gives generous credit.

The Republic of Ireland was once the world's most Catholic country. Eamon de Valera, a long-serving prime minister who had been a hero of the Irish revolution that gained the country's independence from Great Britain, ceded great power to the Dublin archbishop, John McQuaid. The church allowed priests to take infants from unmarried mothers or cart away children from troubled marriages to be warehoused in orphanages that were, decades later, revealed to be horror shows of psychopathic abuses.

In *We Don't Know Ourselves*, an impressive history of modern Ireland, Fintan O'Toole writes of villages in the 1950s as "almost suffocatingly coherent and fixed: Catholic, nationalist and rural."

Thus begins McGarry's story. "Sent into the bog to keep an eye on our cattle as they grazed in summertime, I would lie on the rough heather for an entire afternoon exploring great seas and nations in the clouds while chewing on a sweet slip of long grass — just me and God and his creation. It was bliss. All was harmony, all made sense."

He was 10 when his father landed a good government job. The growing family moved 8 miles to Ballaghaderreen. "The journey traversed centuries as we left behind an old way of life for electricity, running water, stairs, a slated roof and space. We were on our way to a grand metropolis of 1,200 people."

McGarry's primordial desire to feel close to God led the boy to practice saying Mass on a table. Come adolescence, questions arose. "How could men of the cloth be so physically cruel, even gratuitously so, in the classroom? How could all the comparative wealth and worldly power of the Church be justified? I realized early on that my greatest difficulty in becoming a priest would be in taking a vow of obedience."

A stellar student spared abuse, McGarry entered a world of irony. The social Gospel of service to others made a deep imprint. Yet, in high school, "I began to have great difficulty with the entirety of redemption theology, the teaching that Jesus came to earth to placate a God, his father, over a disobedient humanity by taking on his own head the burden of human sinfulness and purging it through his own death to win back the favour of his father. Seriously?"

Questions trailed him through college into the reporting work, which evinces serious heart in his coverage of the abuse crisis, searching out nuances of predators and survivors.

The head office of The Irish Times newspaper in Dublin (Dreamstime/Viorel Dudau)

His section on Bishop Eamonn Casey of Galway resembles a Graham Greene tale. Casey sired a son with a vulnerable young Annie Murphy from Connecticut; the bishop paid $115,000 in installments for her silence till she went public in 1992, amid the early scandal coverage of predatory priests in America and Ireland. Annie's son, Peter, was 17. Casey, a voice of human rights, fled Ireland in shame.

McGarry tracks him to an Ecuadorian village, a bottle of Bushmills whiskey as peace token. His account of meeting a bishop who refused to go on the record is a primer on reporting with what cannot be quoted. They drink the whiskey over a couple of days; McGarry describes Casey's liturgy in Spanish.

At the end, McGarry writes: "I said I hoped I would see him again. His voice cracked, and tears appeared in his eyes. 'Thank you for the respect,' he said, and turned quickly towards the presbytery. He wasn't alone in being moved."

Casey's years in a hospital with Alzheimer's, the funeral with no bishop presiding add a surreal tinge. McGarry profiled Peter in 2013, then 38, a self-described "fat single white guy, with a cat," selling media appliances near Boston. He was 15 before he met his father, the early encounters painful, he tells McGarry.

As time passed things changed. "Did I form a relationship? Did I get to love the man? Sure. But in the end we were never father and son. We were two people who got to know each other. Him, very much in the twilight of life. Me, as a young adult. We became very good friends. That's all I ever wanted from him."

McGarry has a poignant profile of Marie Collins, the valiant survivor who rallied public opinion against the Irish bishops. She later served on Pope Francis' Commission for the Protection of Minors, only to resign, calling down Vatican bureaucrats for blocking the commission's work, and Francis for not supporting his own agenda.

Dublin's retired Archbishop Diarmud Martin emerges in McGarry's lens as a man of integrity who offended priests for championing the cause of survivors, a man bruised by the blowback of tribal politics.

McGarry's coverage of Ireland's social earthquakes reveals a quest.

"You might say that Jesus made me a social democrat," he writes in a coda. "This led me to journalism. ... Media was just the conduit ... to see the meek inherit truth and

justice."