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Patrick Ryan IRA confession: Vatican and church under fire for response to ex-priest's role in IRA



Ex Priest Patrick Ryan confessed to involvement in a range of high profile IRA bomb attacks in the BBC Spotlight Programme.

The Vatican representative in Ireland and church representatives at other levels have been criticised for failing to offer any condemnation on the activities of IRA bomber and former priest Patrick Ryan.

BBC Spotlight this week broadcast an interview with Mr Ryan during which he confessed to working for the IRA while a parish priest in Ireland – and being involved in a string of high-profile bomb attacks in England.

He reportedly left the in 1973 to work full time for the IRA.

The News Letter this week put a series of questions about his past to the Papal Nuncio Archbishop Jude Thaddeus Okolo, the Irish Bishops' Conference and the religious congregation he was a member of, the Pallottines.

While all of them responded, Belfast priest 'Fr' Patrick McCafferty said they should have taken the opportunity to unequivocally condemn Ryan's crimes.

The News Letter asked if there was now any church investigation into his activities while a priest, if he was still receiving church support, if the church would cooperate with police investigations into him, and for details of any disciplinary action taken against him.

...given the seriousness of the content in the Spotlight programme, and the possibility of investigations by the relevant authorities, I feel that it would be inappropriate for me to make any further comments... Pallottine order spokesman

None of the church offices suggested there is any investigation into his IRA activities while he was a parish priest.

Papal Nuncio Archbishop Jude Thaddeus Okolo responded: "The issues you raise fall completely outside the remit of this Apostolic Nunciature. You may have to contact the priest himself or his bishop.

"As you know, priests are under the direct responsibility of their respective bishops."

However, the Irish Bishops' Conference was not able to offer any further comment. Instead, a spokesman noted Ryan was a member of the Pallottines order and directed the News Letter to it for answers.

"As each religious congregation is self-governing, it is necessary to contact a congregation directly for information concerning its operation," he added.

The provincial rector of Mr Ryan's former order said he is currently out of the country and has no records on the ex-priest.

"The information on him and his life and activities that I have is what is reported in the media," said Jeremiah Murphy.



RC Priest, Patrick McCafferty said the church leadership should have condemned Ryan's actions.



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He said Mr Ryan left the order 40 years ago, has not maintained contact and does not receive any support from the order, which "always cooperates" with Church and state in investigations. Ryan was a missionary in Africa and a parish priest in Tipperary in the late 1960s while working for the IRA.

But former IRA bomber and committed Catholic Shane Paul O'Doherty posed eight questions he says his church should answer regarding Mr Ryan.

Ryan had been a missionary in Africa and later a parish priest in Ireland at the end of the 1960s.

The ex-priest said he financially contributed to the IRA, in part using money from mission boxes. Later the IRA asked him to come and work full time for it, travelling the world and raising support. He reportedly fell out with the church and left the Pallottine order in 1973.

Blogger Mr O'Doherty from Londonderry, who now opposes violence, said the church should answer questions about Ryan's time as a priest:

- How did he leave the Pallottine order – did he apply to be "laicised" or released from his vows and from his ordination as a priest?
- Or was this matter progressed by the order in Ryan's absence and against his wishes?
- If the order progressed this against his wishes, was it because it had information against Ryan, and if so what kind of information?
- Did the order know he joined the IRA and "was using his former religious/priestly habit and identity to promote the IRA's murderous aims?"
- And if so, did the order inform the police about his activities?
- There must have been concrete reasons to laicise an ordained member – what were the reasons?
- Did Ryan share his decision to join the IRA with other members of the Pallottine order?
- Did the order ever inform the police that this member/former member had begun to work for the IRA, which Mr O'Doherty said he did using his 'priestly' identity to evade the authorities abroad?

"Interesting questions never asked nor answered," he added.

West Belfast priest Fr Patrick McCafferty added: "Those are reasonable questions and they deserve a proper response."

He says the first thing Catholic church leaders should have said when asked about Ryan, was to say his IRA activities were "entirely incompatible with being a priest".

"The first thing they should have done was to condemn what he did and to make it very clear that what he was doing was the antithesis of what a priest should be doing and to make that pretty clear," Fr McCafferty said.

The papal nuncio is a diplomat and was right to say the matter is beyond his remit, he said. "But you are a priest first of all, you are minister of the gospel first of all," he added.

There would be no question the representatives would condemn Ryan's activities, he said, while accepting there was no evidence they had done so since his IRA confessions this week.

"Well I can't speak for them, they should know immediately the first thing is to condemn what he is doing and what he was involved in and to offer sympathies to those that suffered as a result of his activities. That is common sense. But sadly you can only have common sense for yourself, not for others."



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It was possible the representatives thought "it goes without saying but ... maybe it doesn't go without saying. So they maybe should have added that in very clear [language] quickly to say that".

Fr McCafferty said Ryan left the priesthood a long time ago, but accepted his IRA career began before he left the church.

"His whole demeanour is astonishing, his gloating over what he did ... it's grotesque."

"Maverick" IRA priests and "demon pastors" who blessed pipe bombs were a small minority during the Troubles, he added.

"Thank God the vast majority of priests and Protestant ministers preached against violence and worked for peace."

The News Letter sent all three Catholic representatives copies of the questions posed by Mr O'Doherty and also asked if they had any comments about Ryan's IRA activities.

The provincial rector of Mr Ryan's former order, Jeremiah Murphy, declined to address them or Ryan's actions.

"In response... and given the seriousness of the content in the Spotlight programme, and the possibility of investigations by the relevant authorities, I feel that it would be inappropriate for me to make any further comments," he said. "I reiterate that we, the Pallottines, always cooperate with Church and State."

The spokesman for the Irish Conference of Bishops declined to make any further comment, while the Papal Nuncio has yet to respond.

DUP MP Sir Jeffrey Donaldson said the church should take a clear stance in the interests of setting of influencing the next generation.

"It would appear that Patrick Ryan severed his connections with the Roman Catholic Church some 40 years ago," he said. "Ultimately, he is responsible for his own actions but in his self confessed terrorist activity, he broke his vows to the church and brought disgrace upon his Christian witness.

"It remains the fact that, whilst serving as a Priest and by his own admission, he engaged in actions supportive of the PIRA and their unlawful terrorist activities. The church must unequivocally distance itself from Ryan and condemn his actions. It is crucial that impressionable young minds are influenced in the right way and that there is no question of anyone turning a blind eye to this mans evil actions.

"We are engaging with the Home Office to ensure that the UK authorities give urgent consideration to issuing an extradition warrant to the Irish Government for the arrest and transfer of Ryan to the UK so that he can face questioning for the alleged crimes that he has confessed to. The sooner he faces justice, the better.