**Controversial private secretary to three popes subject of disturbing revelations  
The Bishop of Cloyne**

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PROFILE: Propelled to Bishop of Cloyne by a glittering career in the Vatican, John Magee faces very serious accusations

PRIVATE SECRETARY to three popes and party to an infamous “white lie” concerning the death of Pope John Paul I, Bishop John Magee (74) faces the greatest challenge of his life following revelations in yesterday’s Cloyne report.

Apart from its finding his behaviour was “inappropriate” where one young man was concerned, he may now also face charges of reckless endangerment through overseeing “inadequate and in some respects dangerous” child safeguarding practices in Cloyne diocese while bishop there.

["Inappropriate" .... is this like using the salad fork for the main course, or serving red wine with fish? Maybe it's just "a crime against customs"]

The man now at the centre of this latest Catholic Church child sex abuse storm has had a colourful life. From Newry, Co Down, he is unique in Catholic Church history, being the only private secretary to serve three popes. Between 1975 and 1982, he was private secretary to popes Paul VI, John Paul I and John Paul II.

Born on September 24th, 1936, he was one of seven children. His father, Charles, owned a 360-acre dairy farm near Newry and had been president of the Ulster Farmers’ Union, chairman of the Northern Ireland Hospitals Board, and president of Newry Agricultural Society.

After attending St Colman’s College in Newry, in 1954 John Magee entered the St Patrick’s Missionary Society religious congregation, based at Kiltegan, Co Wicklow. During his first year there, both his parents died.

In 1955, he began attending UCC, from where he graduated with an honours philosophy degree in 1958 before going to study theology in Rome. He was ordained there on St Patrick’s Day, 1962.

He worked on the missions in Nigeria for almost six years before being appointed Procurator General of the St Patrick’s Society in Rome in 1968. Then began his climb through Vatican structures. In 1969 he was appointed secretary to the Vatican’s Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, a position he held until he was appointed personal and private secretary to Pope Paul VI in 1975.

Years later, he would speak of the father-son relationship he enjoyed with Pope Paul VI and the more brotherly bonds he experienced with Pope John Paul I and Pope John Paul II. During Pope John Paul II’s visit to Ireland in 1979, Msgr Magee was a constant presence at his side.

In 1981, Msgr Magee visited Bobby Sands during the hunger strikes at the pope’s request, in an unsuccessful attempt to bring the strikes to an end. Just days before Bobby Sands died, he personally implored republican leaders in the Maze Prison to call off their protest. The plea failed, but its significance was not lost, and on his deathbed Sands wore a crucifix he had given him.

The Maze talks, which drew massive publicity, saw Magee meet other hunger strikers, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh and Patsy O’Hara (all of whom died later), before he embarked on a sequence of private attempts to sympathise with families of victims of republican violence.

While in Northern Ireland, he went to the funeral of Richard McKee, a Protestant UDR soldier shot dead by the IRA and prayed at his coffin. He also met the family of Catholic Territorial Army officer Hugh McGinn, shot dead outside his home near Armagh by the INLA.

In 1982, he was appointed Pope John Paul II’s master of ceremonies, a position he held until his surprise appointment as Bishop of Cloyne in 1987. His loyalty to the church was so strong it made him party to one of the more infamous white lies of the 20th century.

This followed Pope John Paul I’s death in 1978. Amid the consternation prompted by the death of the new pope, after just 33 days in office, the Vatican offered bewildering and contradictory accounts of who found the pope, as well as the time and cause of his death.

It issued the statement: “This morning, September 29th, 1978, about 5.30am, the private secretary of the pope, contrary to custom, not having found the Holy Father in the chapel of his private apartment, looked in his room and found him dead in bed with the light on . . .”

In an interview with *The Irish Times* in March 1987, when he was ordained in Rome as Bishop of Cloyne and on being asked if there was truth in the theory that a nun was the first person to find Pope John Paul I’s body, Bishop Magee said, “No”. He continued: “I found him and I will stand before any person and challenge him.”

But a year later, in the September 1988 issue of religious affairs magazine Trenta Giorni (30 days), he had changed his mind, saying: “In the morning, around 5.30am, a sister woke me in a state of agitation – the pope is dead, she said. She had been worried about the fact that the pope had not yet drunk the coffee that she usually left for him at 4.30am in front of his door. Then she ran below and told me.”

Most commentators now accept the dead pope was found in his bedroom in the early morning by Sr Vincenza, a nun in the papal household. Senior Vatican figures felt it would be inappropriate to issue a press statement saying a nun had been in the pope’s bedroom early in the morning.

Nevertheless Bishop Magee claimed consistency in his accounts. In a 1990 interview with RTÉ, he said: “I did find the body of his holiness. I just didn’t find it first.”

In the 1989 book *A Thief In The Night* , written with Vatican approval to discredit murder theories about John Paul I’s death, John Cornwell concluded all was “not well” in the papal household then, citing the “rivalry and enmity” between Magee and the pope’s Italian secretary, Don Diego Lorenzi. In an interview, Lorenzi did little to hide this tension, suggesting Magee had toed the Vatican line with his eye on a bishop’s hat: “. . . We have never been told what to say after the pope died . . . so I’ve always been open about it and talked to anybody. Magee has said nothing about Papa Luciani . He has been scared, probably because his bishopric was just around the corner. When he was elected bishop, he had nothing to fear for his own career. Do you get it? So, now he has no problem in saying the truth . . .”

His posting to Cloyne from Rome in 1987 was a surprise. Commentators believed his closeness to three pontiffs had paved the way for a bishopric in Rome, which, as far as is publicly known, was never offered. Then, in Ireland, it was speculated he was being posted to Cloyne as a stepping stone to becoming archbishop of Armagh and Catholic Primate of All-Ireland.

While in Cloyne, Bishop Magee courted little controversy or publicity, bar one lengthy row over a proposed renovation of St Colman’s Cathedral in Cobh.

Then, in 2008, a report was published on the Cloyne website revealing how Bishop Magee had been less than vigilant when it came to child protection.

The 2008 report was prepared by the Irish church’s own child protection watchdog, its National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church, which found child protection practices in Cloyne were “inadequate and in some respects dangerous”. This was despite Bishop Magee having signed up to the implementation of the Irish church’s 1996 guidelines and its updated version in 2005. He had been a member of the Irish Episcopal Conference since 1987, which introduced both.

In January 2009, when announcing the remit of the Murphy commission was being extended to include Cloyne diocese, then minister for children Barry Andrews disclosed that Bishop Magee had misled the State on child protection in Cloyne. He did so when, following publication of the Ferns report in October 2005, he assured the late Brian Lenihan, then minister for children, that child protection practices in Cloyne were in line with church and State guidelines.

He did so again in 2007 where a Health Service Executive audit of such practices was concerned. In both instances, he “misled” the State authorities, yesterday’s report found, by providing “false” information.

The report also found he misled the national board’s chief executive Ian Elliott who conducted that 2008 church watchdog report, and did not provide him with all documentation in his possession.

The report further found that Bishop Magee prepared two separate and different accounts of a meeting with an accused priest in September 2005. One was for Rome, where the priest admitted his guilt, and one for a Cloyne advisory committee, which included lay people, where the allegation was denied. This latter account also recorded that Bishop Magee told the priest he was standing him down from ministry pending an investigation.

Early in 2009, despite a tsunami of calls for his resignation following the board’s report, Bishop Magee remained determined not to stand down. He was supported by three of Ireland’s Catholic archbishops: the Catholic primate, Cardinal Seán Brady, Archbishop Dermot Clifford of Cashel and Archbishop Michael Neary of Tuam.

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin said he should do what was right by child protection in his diocese, widely interpreted at the time as indicating Bishop Magee should step down

In January 2009, “Joseph” made allegations against Bishop Magee himself. These were not made public until yesterday. In expressing support for Bishop Magee at the time, both Cardinal Brady and Archbishop Clifford were aware of this allegation.

It is unclear whether Archbishop Martin or Archbishop Neary were so aware then.

In March 2009, Bishop Magee announced he was standing aside from administrative duties in Cloyne to assist the commission in its investigations. Rome announced that Archbishop Dermot Clifford of Cashel had been appointed Apostolic Administrator to Cloyne diocese.

A year later, in March 2010, Bishop Magee announced his resignation. Currently, he is in retirement at Mitchelstown and remains a bishop in good standing with the Catholic Church.

Whereas his greatest irresponsibility was wanton and reckless disregard for the protection of children in Cloyne, it is most likely that, following yesterday’s report, most focus will be on allegations of inappropriate behaviour with a young man made against Bishop Magee himself.