



# CNI



## PRESS WATCH

### Can Ireland rediscover its faith – as I did?

**John Waters writes in The Catholic Herald.**

When I think of my country and its relationship with Catholicism, I think of it, in what I hope is appropriate humility, as being about 25 years

behind on the path I have travelled myself. In the middle 1970s, when I was 19 and 20, I began a period of vaguely oedipal struggling against the Church. I recall that my main focus was what I deemed “hypocrisy”: the way Church personnel said one thing and did another.

There were some unlucky priests upon whom I frowned for their love of female company or a good whiskey, and this became a useful mechanism in enabling what I later recognised as the carefully constructed alibi for my resolve to shake off the judgments of Catholicism and get on with exploring those exciting new freedoms I identified as being in conflict with the theology of my upbringing.

Faced with a choice between Jesus and Elvis, I chose Elvis, and hardly gave it another thought. For many years I stood at pub counters and pontificated about the obsolescence of God, my tales of priestly debauchery growing legs and moustaches by the new time. For a while I worked as a roadie with a band and remember with great vividness the early hours of Sunday, September 30, 1979, returning to Dublin from a gig in Derry and meeting on the way the headlights of the thousands of cars of the pilgrims who had travelled south to see Pope John Paul II in the Phoenix Park – feeling utterly

alienated from the event. Although John Paul II had a superficial attraction for me, I had deliberately placed myself outside the embrace of his visit, not wanting a surge of sentimentalism to unseat my determination to continue walking away.

It was the drink that, in the end, brought me to my knees, in just about every sense you can conceive of. Forced in Alcoholics Anonymous to summon up a concept of “God as You Understand Him”, I reluctantly started reimagining the Christian God of my childhood – first the Father, more or less sitting on a white cloud, but eventually Christ, with whom I allowed myself to become reconciled on realising that there was in fact no reasonable barrier to my having both Him and Elvis at the same time.

This rapprochement coincided more or less precisely with the beginnings of the collective estrangement of my countrymen from the Church, which followed a quite remarkably similar pattern to my own: denunciations of the pietistic zealotry and obscurantism that had allegedly constrained Irish people in their freedoms, and of the doublethink and hypocrisies of those deemed the enforcers of an outmoded moralism.

Conventional wisdom assumes that Irish Catholicism remained vibrant until the emergence of the clerical scandals of the 1990s, starting with Bishop Eamonn Casey's exposure for having had an affair out of which was born his son Peter. Bishop Casey, who died recently, was merely the entrée of a long unravelling to follow, with revelations about historical sex abuse by priests functioning to marginalise and eventually hush the Church's voice on virtually anything to do with sex or morality.

From where I stood, these scandals seemed to offer convenient alibis to people already struggling in adulthood to find an engagement with Catholicism, allowing them publicly to declare their alienation. The real problem related to the reduction of Irish Christianity, over the previous century or so, into two thin strands: moralism and emotionalism.

The brand of Christianity purveyed by the Irish Church since the famines of the 1840s was rich in piety but poor in reason, which meant that in the end people regarded their priests more as a moral police force than the custodians of mystery in the world. Christ, at once the Chief of Police and yet manifestly incompatible with this moralism, became externalised and suffused in an aura of sentimentality.

It goes on. The recent unembellished replaying of the three-year-old saga of the Tuam Mother and Baby Home, which again went around the world and enabled even media organisations which had apologised for publishing such tenuous and unsubstantiated allegations in 2014, to embrace the story again with renewed gusto. It may not be coincidental that the story was reinterred just as the Citizens' Assembly, a body reviewing the constitutional position of the unborn child, was entering the final stages of its deliberations.

I have some hopes that, one day, Irish society may turn and look more truthfully at the past it seems so determined to bury in the septic tank of bad history. I am broadly hopeful, but not especially optimistic for a change during my own lifetime. Right now, my country seems determined to exceed the duration of my own sojourn in the wilderness. I can think of no equivalent of alcoholism – with the possible exception of (God forbid) war – that might afflict a whole country and bring her to her senses. I simply say, from my own direct experience, that the human spirit remains always subliminally alert and longing, and that its infinite desiring cannot long remain buried under baubles, analgesics and untruths. Perhaps Ireland is not

as far as we might fear from a necessary re-evaluation of God as She Understands Him.

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