
Comment - The church has come a long way, painfully, since the Casey affair

Last week a sumptuous house located in one of the most scenic parts of the Dingle Peninsula was up for sale - writes Gerard O'Reagan.

With beachfront views of the Atlantic - and the hills and hollows of the Slieve Mish mountains hovering in the background - it is a mood-inducing setting.

But this is also a house of special memory. It is where Bishop Eamon Casey, a one-time ebullient and much admired member of the Irish hierarchy, conducted his now well-chronicled clandestine affair with American divorcee Annie Murphy in the early 1970s.

When it became public knowledge, it rocked the public certitudes of Irish Catholicism, built on the

tenet that its clergy, and most certainly its bishops, were above human frailty.

It is impossible from this remove to appreciate the shock waves this event sent through both religious and laity at the time. Suffice to say that the church authorities, both here and in Rome, were caught flat-footed as they desperately tried to set in train damage limitation.

The battle to batten down public scandal became the overriding concern of those holding power in the church. Looking back, there was little tolerance or forgiveness - surely two of the most critical Christian virtues - shown to those directly involved. The approach from on high was hard, unyielding and unforgiving.

The result was that unnecessary heartbreak was caused to Bishop Casey, Annie Murphy and, most of all, to Peter, the son they had together.

Yet this may not have been all that surprising, given the social mores of Irish Catholicism over the decades. Sins of the flesh were for a long time the defining line between those judged to be saved or sinful.

Even in the 1970s, many thought we had come a long, long, way from the time when the local priest nudged courting couples out of the

ditches and by-roads of rural Ireland with one of those infamous blackthorn sticks.

But in a kind of way, this residue of judgmental intolerance would underpin the official church approach taken to the Bishop Casey affair.

Within a few years, another defining event in the evolution of the Catholic Church in Ireland would manifest itself in the visit of Pope John Paul II to this country. Its centrepiece was the over one million Irish who gathered for a Papal Mass in Dublin's Phoenix Park.

The YouTube videos and RTÉ archive still bear testament to an almost unimaginable spectacle, of such a huge proportion of the Irish population gathered in the one place.

We are told it still ranks as the biggest single coming-together in our history; it will never be repeated.

Modern-day Irish-style Catholicism was spawned in the mid-nineteenth century in the post-Daniel O'Connell 'emancipation' era. Powerful personalities, such as Cardinal Paul Cullen and Dublin Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, would ensure over the ensuing decades church domination of nearly every facet of Irish life, from schools and hospitals, to

orphanages and those infamous Magdalene laundries.

When the 26 counties achieved independence in 1922, the church was well poised to have its power consolidated even further. Soon, it would also have overbearing influence on the artistic and creative life of the country, most famously in its approach to the kind of books deemed suitable for the populace to read.

As Ireland sagged deeper and deeper into the economic malaise of the 1950s, with rampant unemployment and emigration, the high point of Catholic power in Ireland was reached. But mass communication in the 1960s - reflected in phenomena ranging from the introduction of television to increased urbanisation - meant the old way of doing things could not continue.

To a greater or lesser extent, this process of change has continued ever since. And in fairness, many church people have adapted and reinvented their approach in the light of challenges for religion which would have been unimaginable in the past.

But the darkest stain of all would be the horrors of the child sex-abuse scandals, hidden in a secret Ireland for far too long. The connivance of certain religious, who insisted on putting the

public image of an institution ahead of the well-being of children, needlessly wrecked countless lives.

Secularism now stalks the western world. Here in Ireland, Mass attendance and vocations are down, although the great life events of birth, marriage, and death retain an enduring Catholic presence.

Yet it can also be argued that the Irish Catholic Church has never been healthier. It is more open, more accountable and more equal than it has ever been. And it has many priests and other religious who basically want to try and do good by their fellow man - something we should not take for granted.

Now we hear Pope Francis is thinking of coming among us. We should give him a rousing céad míle fáilte. It is, of course, a much-changed country to the Ireland Pope John Paul embraced back in 1977. Accordingly, the welcome will be different.

But although things change, much also remains the same.

So this Pope can remind us of the consolations of the Good Message, first handed down over 2,000 years ago in the ancient land of Israel.

First published in the Irish Independent, October 4, 2015