

Our Hope Lies in the Recognition of a Presence

In recent weeks the many civic, moral and socio-political implications of The Murphy Report have been analysed in detail. But, as John Waters pointed out in a recent Irish Times column, “there are deeper questions pertaining to Christianity, which by definition cannot be dealt with in a public discussion in which faith has been separated from the knowledge of reality”.

Our faith was handed down to us here in Ireland at great personal cost to those who chose to remain faithful over the centuries. But at some point in our history it’s as though we began to take it all for granted. Piety, moralism and sentimentality came to substitute a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ as the answer to human thirst for truth, happiness, beauty, love, justice and ultimate meaning. If faith does not become a personal adventure for every Christian, it crystallizes, becoming nothing more than a set of precepts or a sentimental adherence to lofty ideals. It is only by taking part in this adventure that one can begin to understand the irreducible nature and eternal value of their own person and begin to look at others in the same light. It is from this knowledge that a true reverence and respect for every human being becomes possible. Without this any interaction with others will be self-serving to greater or lesser extent.

Christ proposes himself as an answer to what I am. It is only by taking my humanity seriously that I can begin to live a relationship with Him. Otherwise He is just a name. John Waters, in the above quoted article, says “What is missing is not intensity of faith, but awareness of human reality. Christ is not the icon of a popular piety based on a necessary moralism or a salutary tradition. He is a living man who is here now, and whose presence defines everything. We either know this or we don’t. It is not a matter of faith but of knowledge.”

We are at a defining moment in the history of the Irish Church. As long as we live in a Church in which Christian answers overshadow man’s queries we cannot move forward to begin that path of knowledge. We cannot experience Christ as a living Presence who saves my humanity now. We all need to take a look at our lives, taking our own human questions seriously and ask ourselves: “Do I ‘believe’ in Christ or do I actually know Him? Is He a familiar presence in my everyday life?”

To quote John Waters once again: “What is assaulted in the Christian sensibility by child abuse and its cover-up is not faith in the integrity of bishops, but an instilled sense of the world revealed by Christ, from the very moments we opened our eyes, in which each of us is loved beyond imagining. The sense of betrayal therefore extends far beyond any sense of the breaching of laws, civil convention or even moral principles”.

How on earth then does faith still stand any chance of success? It is because it finds a correspondence in human nature. How is it that all these betrayals and reductions of Christian faith have not gained the upper hand in us? Because the Fact that we have encountered, God made man, is absolutely irreducible. We are not able to wipe it away. Today (not in the past, but today) we stand in front of the Fact of Christ which challenges our reason and our freedom.