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A Cardinal's Voice of Protest : Cardinal Cahal Daly and the Dangers Facing Planet Earth

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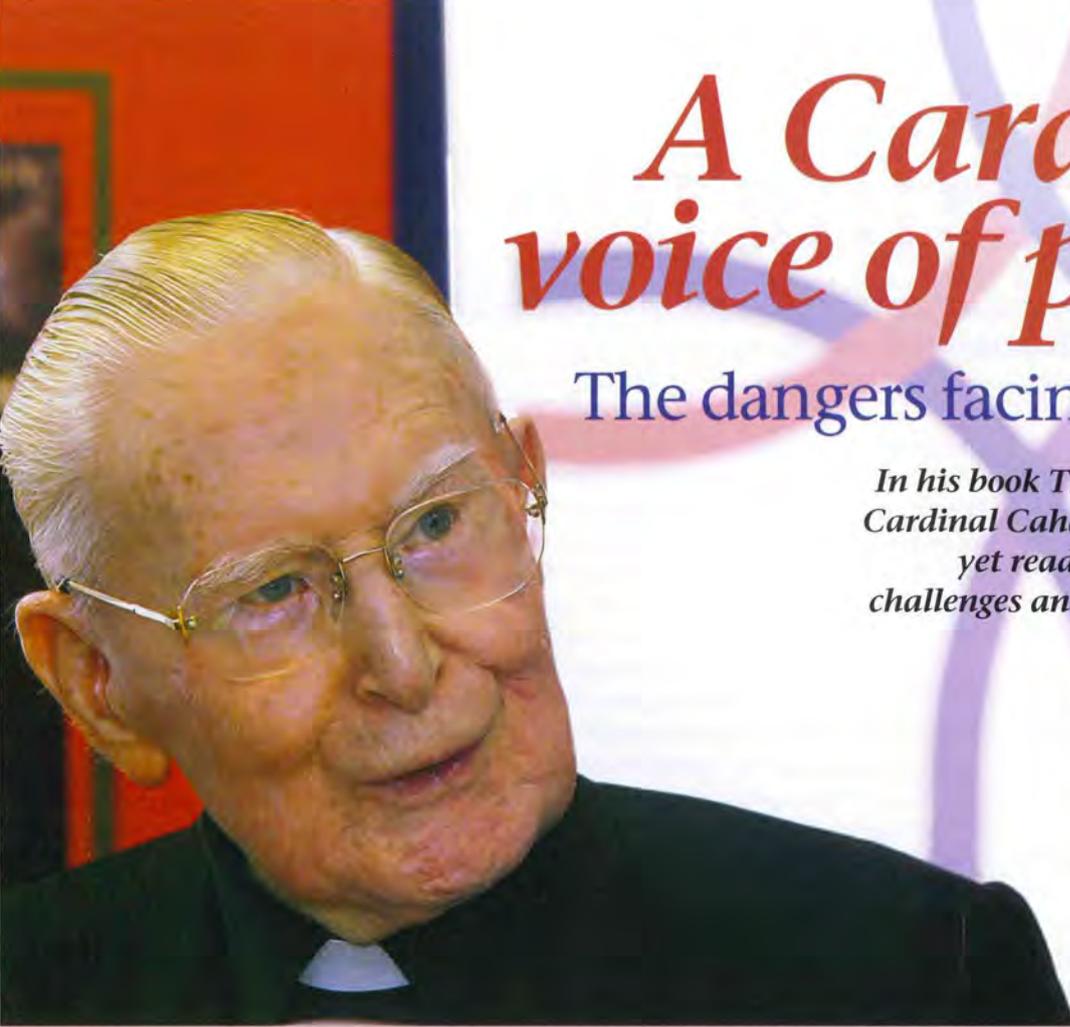


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A Cardinal's voice of protest

The dangers facing planet earth

*In his book **The Minding of Planet Earth**, Cardinal Cahal Daly presents a scholarly, yet readable analysis of some of the challenges and dangers facing our planet, writes **Eamon Maher***



It is hard to dislike Cardinal Cahal Daly. A man of peace, a genuine Christian witness, a scholar, he possesses many admirable qualities. I liked the excerpt from his latest book, *The Minding of Planet Earth* (Veritas: 2004) that appeared in *The Irish Times* a few months ago. The views expressed in it made me want to read his reflections in full, which I have duly done.

Senator Shane Ross in *The Sunday Independent* took issue with the cardinal's competence to pronounce on such issues as tax and, while acknowledging his positive feelings towards the man, proceeded to cast much scorn at some of the positions he adopted. It is worth quoting some parts of Ross's article ("Give us this day our Daly bread," *Sunday Independent*, August 29, 2004): "The good cardinal is an authority on theology. He is hardly a master of the dull details of accountancy. He seems to believe that everyone should pay their fair share of tax."

Ross develops a seeming contradiction in Daly's calling for an equitable tax system when priests in this country are classified as 'self-employed' for taxation purposes. In Armagh, they get a minimum wage, and after that depend on the generosity of their flock to supply them

with additional income – all of it paid in cash, of course! He continues:

"Not only does Daly condemn tax evasion, he seems to blame the 'richer people' for the problems of the poor. He links tax evasion to poverty. He says Ireland's rich people's decisions – on their domicile, their citizenship, their investments and even their profits – distance them from the negative consequences for the poor. Blame the tax evasion of the better-off for poverty."

Ross considers this a dubious thesis at best because of the fact that poor people, living under an extremely penal tax system, were forced to evade tax themselves. He goes on in a similar vein for a few more columns, stating the cardinal's obvious dislike for 'liberal capitalism' and saying how his choice for Minister for Finance would probably be Joan Burton of Labour rather than the former incumbent, Charlie McCreevy. The former would have more sympathy with the problems of the Third World and poverty in general. Ross ends his article with the following observations:

"Daly is a wonderful, lovable man, a cleric of impeccable morality and humour. As a peacemaker, he may well be without parallel; but he should spare

us his forays into the world of tax.

"On second thoughts, why should he? Being an archbishop makes you an authority on everything. That is why it must be great crack to be a cardinal."

Example of how Ireland has changed

Talk about killing a man with faint praise! You may well be wondering why I'm giving so much attention to Shane Ross's views, which are at variance with my own. I do so for a number of reasons.

First, to illustrate how times have changed in Ireland. A short few decades ago, a journalist would have thought twice before embarking on such a tirade against a cardinal. Public opinion would have been predisposed to respect the views of a person of episcopal standing. However, there is now a widely held view that Catholic priests and religious of all guises have no right to point out issues in relation to social justice, the abuse of the environment, sexual activity, or the growing gap between rich and poor. The reactions of most Irish people are quite simplistic: What right have they to be preaching to us? They'd be better off putting their own house in order! What about the Magdalen laundries, the indus-

trial schools, Brendan Smyth, Eamon Casey, Michael Cleary?

There was undoubtedly much damage caused by all the aforementioned, but is that sufficient reason to tar all the good work done by individuals on the ground? Because there are so many priests, nuns and religious who are doing fabulous work in highlighting the plight of the less well-off in Irish society. They are reminding the politicians and people at large that the Celtic Tiger hasn't brought many advantages to the lower sections of Irish society. The voices of Peter McVerry, Sister Stanislaus, Seán Healy, Willie Walsh (the bishop, not the chief executive of Aer Lingus!) continue to make a case for the needy, even when the vast majority of people don't want to hear their message. They are the type of Christian witnesses that we need.

We also require books like the one written by Cahal Daly. Readers might find some of it heavy-going. There are long quotations from papal encyclicals and different philosophers which grate at times. But there are excellent sections also, and it is on these I will concentrate. Shane Ross dealt with what is a very short passage in the book that deals with taxation. The five chapters are Science and Faith, The Galileo Case, Church and World, The Christian and Work, The Minding of Planet Earth (1) and (2).

Science & Faith

Beginning as he does with the tendency of many of our contemporaries to abandon faith which they view as being incompatible with science, he dismisses the notion that religion and church are intrinsically unscientific. Ever since the Enlightenment, reason and modernity have been set in opposition to faith, backwardness and superstition. Daly explores how this view should not be accepted at face value. Just because faith involves a belief in the intrinsic mystery that lies at the heart of existence does not make it incompatible with science. He cites no less an authority than Einstein who, in *The World as I See it*, wrote:

"The fairest thing that we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle."

Einstein went on to say how reason was not sufficiently powerful to penetrate the

mystery of beauty, art, and science itself. Accepting this fact made him consider himself a 'deeply religious man.'

This opening chapter is well-argued and reads easily. It leads logically to the chapter devoted to the Galileo case: the scientist who was persecuted by the Catholic Church for what were considered heretical views at the time. His rehabilitation took a long time but it did happen in the course of the Second Vatican Council more than three centuries later.

The scope for tension between science and faith is always there, and perhaps this is not all bad. After all, a fusion of the strengths of both systems is necessary if we are to increase our understanding of the universe we inhabit. People who have had the opportunity to view the earth from space and to appreciate more fully the vastness of the celestial skies have often related their awe at the splendour of creation and stated their conviction that a divine source must be at its origin.

The church & sexuality

Chapter III, 'Church and World', contains a number of interesting observations. For example, it traces the tendency of Christianity to despise and fear the body, and particularly sexuality, as a source of temptation and sin back to the alleged Platonic influence on the Fathers of the Church. But he maintains there is also a more positive strain of thinking: "The Church has also been mindful of St Paul's teaching that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, that God dwells in the body, and that Christ has redeemed it and sanctifies it."

That may well be true, but in Ireland, at any rate, sexuality was the big taboo, to such an extent that distorted attitudes engendered scruples and guilt, even deviancy, among both lay and religious. The wheel has come full circle, and young people today are becoming sexually active at a much younger age. The idea of 'deferred gratification' is alien to most of them, just as they have no strong sense of sin or guilt. Neither situation is healthy.

Reflections on Camus

Cardinal Daly is a well-read man, and is particularly strong on the French philosophers and writers. In this chapter he refers to Camus's rejection of Christianity because of how many Christians seemed committed to a sort of

systematic bad faith. He paraphrases Camus's questions: "Do they (Christians) simply use this world as an opportunity for gaining merit in the next world? Do they merely use their fellow-humans as occasions of 'making acts' of charity directed, not at brother and sister humans, but at God and, ultimately, at self-interest?"

This is certainly the problem Dr Rieux raises in *The Plague* as well as asking how an all-loving God could allow the suffering and death of innocent children. In the end, he comes to the conclusion that sometimes we are asked to love what we cannot understand.

Daly urges that we find more time for meditation on the beauty that is around us. John McGahern writes very persuasively on this point when he describes how Moran, the hero of *Amongst Women*, spent so much time struggling with nature that he failed to see its splendour: "He had never realised when he was in the midst of confident life what an amazing glory he was part of." (*Amongst Women*, London: Faber&Faber, 1990, p.179)

Care for the earth

This leads ultimately to the central point of the book, how we should 'mind' the earth. Chapter IV emphasises the need for all people to work. He quotes Pius XII's comment on Christmas Eve, 1953:

Just because faith involves a belief in the intrinsic mystery that lies at the heart of existence does not make it incompatible with science.



"[Man] is being transformed into a giant of the physical world at the expense of his spirit which is reduced to that of a pygmy in the supernatural and eternal world."

While work is important, it can never be seen as a replacement for a fulfilling spiritual life. I was hugely taken with the quote from Jung's book, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, in which he noted:

"Among all my patients (over thirty-five years of age) there has not been one

whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them has been healed who did not regain his religious outlook."

Daly is not concerned with providing an apologia for Christian values and beliefs. Naturally, he uses quotes from sources that confirm his own convictions. Jung was a surprise to me, I must admit, but a pleasant discovery at the same time.

I am less taken with the various papal pronouncements on caring for the earth. There can be no doubt we are encountering a serious ecological crisis because of the unwillingness of the wealthier nations to share their riches with the poorer ones: "If one section of humanity grabs an unfairly large share of the world's resources, others will be left with less than their just share." There can be no argument with that.

Personal touch

I like the personal touch he introduces when explaining why he has such strong

views on the destruction of the riches of the world. Cahal Daly was brought up in a rural environment at a time when wilful waste of any kind was abhorred. He also had an inbuilt respect for the land and its produce. His family ate simply but well. With increased prosperity has come greed and a loss of the traditional reference points. Obesity, over-indulgence in alcohol, disposal of waste material, are all quoted as examples of the problems associated with superfluity. In addition, we encounter time poverty, the breakdown of family, increased incidence of young males taking their own lives, drug abuse, all increasing at a time when consumerism has gone out of control.

There is more than enough wealth in the world for each of its inhabitants to live in reasonable comfort. But what happens is that the discrepancies between the rich and powerful and the Third World are increasing all the time. This fuels resentment among the have-nots, a resentment that was at the heart of 9/11 and other such atrocities. The disenfranchised see the injustices that are being visited on them and seek

redress. The perilous state of the physical environment is mirrored in the political turmoil between the Western powers and the Arab nations, between black and white, Muslim and Christian, Arab and Jew.

Readable, yet scholarly

The author moves through all these issues in a style that is readable and yet scholarly. It is impossible to do justice to all the issues that are raised by Daly in a short review article such as this. My purpose is simply to give a flavour of what the book is about. Like me, you will probably find some sections more to your liking than others. I can tell you that the section on tax evasion that so intrigued Shane Ross takes up a mere two pages of the total of 254.

One gets the impression that the book encapsulates the thoughts of a man who has been reflecting over a long life on these matters, and that recording them was important to him. I don't think prospective readers will be disappointed with what they will find in *The Minding of Planet Earth*. ■