

Feeding our Faith, Sustaining our Parish

I've never really liked dates - I'm talking about the fruit. When I was working in Saudi Arabia, my Saudi colleagues just couldn't understand for a moment how anyone could not like something that was so basic to their diet. To them it was automatic that everyone liked dates. Perhaps the same could be said about someone who is passionate about a particular hobby - fishing, train spotting, ballroom dancing, antiques, football - and who may struggle to comprehend how other people can get through life with no such interest whatsoever. In a sense I suppose I feel the same about my faith. Clearly being a priest might be expected to create a heightened involvement in, and commitment to, the practise of my faith, but I'm speaking in a more general sense than that.

It never ceases to amaze me, standing outside of church on a Sunday morning, to realise how many people are going about their business with no apparent concept that it's the Lord's Day. I look at all the people strolling past St Hilda's on their way to the paper shop or the supermarket, and few, if any, of them are also on their way to Mass or morning service. I look at the crowds that get themselves out of bed at the crack of dawn in the hope of snapping up a bargain at the Sunday car boot sale. Would they get up that early for church? Would they get up at all for church? Do they not see salvation as a bargain to be snapped up? For so many people Sunday just doesn't rate and, sadly, neither does God except when they're in trouble and maybe not even then - and that's not meant to be judgmental, it's simply a fact of modern life. We who believe, and, more specifically, we who practise our faith, are in the minority - there are probably more people at that car boot sale than would be in church!

How can so many people go through life with no immediate sense of God, much less a declared affiliation to a particular denomination? How can their daily choices and actions be governed by nothing more than their own personal taste or creed? Do we sometimes find ourselves a little envious of such people seemingly freewheeling through life? Is my faith, then, a brake on my freewheeling or is it, rather, something that gives meaning and purpose to my life? Could I imagine my life without my faith? Indeed, could I *deal* with life without my faith?

Church in the sense of going to church has always been important to me. No doubt there was a time when I went to Mass on Sundays because I had to and because if I didn't it was a mortal sin. I well remember one Sunday when my Dad and I set off to Mass (my mother wasn't a Catholic) - I was young enough at the time that I could sit on the crossbar of my Dad's bike. I remember him warning me to keep my feet clear of the front wheel and the next thing I knew we were both flying over the handlebars because the front wheel is exactly

where one of my feet had gone - we hadn't even left our street yet! I landed first, the bike on top of me, and my Dad on top of the bike and me. He went back home in a huff and I set off, with grazed knees and elbows, to walk the mile to church because I knew I had to go to Mass.

I never went through the typical late-teenage rebellion stage against going to church; there never had to be any of the "As long as you live in this house you'll go to church" stuff from my parents. I just always went. And it seems as if, over the years, I gradually became increasingly involved in the life of my parish and of the Church, eventually pursuing my experience of a vocation to the priesthood. Maybe that's the first question to ask: is our faith only about going to church, as important as that is, or as we have grown older has the practise of our faith also matured and found its expression in other areas of involvement?

Statistically, in a typical parish, fewer than 10% of nominal Catholics would be going to Mass on a regular basis and even then not all of them every Sunday despite the fact that it is a mortal sin to deliberately not go without due cause. Nine-out-of-ten nominal Catholics are therefore not even practising their faith at all. Talking with diocesan colleagues and priest-friends elsewhere, typically only about 10% of that Mass-going 10% attend parish meetings, courses and activities (and it's usually the same core group each time) meaning that as many as nine-out-of-ten parishioners are not involved in the life of their parish beyond their attendance at Mass.

I do, of course, appreciate that in any parish a great many people do have other and important commitments - especially in terms of their work and their family - and are simply not as free as they might like to be in terms of Mass and parish activities. I didn't want you to think that I thought everyone was as free to be involved as priests are (even though some think we only work on Sundays!). Equally I recognise that many are indeed already involved in various aspects of the life of the parish and so I may be "preaching to the converted" as they say.

"Baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ, therefore we are members one of another. Baptism incorporates us into the Church.¹ The baptised have become living stones to be built into a spiritual house. (para 1268) Having become a member of the Church, the person baptised belongs no longer to him(her)self, but to him who died and rose for us. From now on, he/she is called to be subject to others, to serve them in the communion of the Church. (para 1269) They participate in the apostolic and missionary activity of the People of God." (para 1270) What the catechism is saying is that, by virtue of our baptism, we become (in the nicest sense of the words) "split personalities" - we belong to the world but we also belong to God, we have a physical self and a spiritual self but the

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 1267.

two are indivisible in that we can't just put on our Catholic self on Sundays along with our "Sunday best" clothes. Who we are as people of faith is who we are twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks of the year. Church isn't just somewhere we go or something we do, it's who we are. Perhaps if the Catholic tradition was to plunge the candidate for baptism into the water of the baptismal pool, we might identify a little more with the symbolism of the fact that we are, or should be, totally immersed in Christ, dripping with faith as it were. And it could well be a challenge to many to realise that they are, as the catechism says, "called to serve (others) in the communion of the Church... (and to) participate in the apostolic and missionary activity of the People of God." We can do neither of those properly or well unless we are involved in the life of the Church and of our faith community.

The Church can be likened to a sailing ship, but it's not a cruise ship where we can sit back and relax and let the crew do all the work - we *are* the crew. There are a thousand things that need to be done to keep a sailing ship on course and operating smoothly - just ask the captain of the *Grand Turk*. If we don't play our part, then the work falls to others who may well be busy enough already. The Holy Spirit is the wind driving the ship forward and anything that we can do to get every ounce out of that wind can only be to our advantage. On the other hand, progress will only be hampered if people keep lowering lifeboats - or the anchor! Enough with the nautical imagery... well, just one more if I may. Unlike with a ship, trying to "press gang" people into service in the Church doesn't work; rather it is hoped that people will volunteer in numbers, out of a passion for, and commitment to, their faith.

I started out with the example of dates and hobbies and the different perception that people can have when they are passionate about something. Yes, I'm going to have a slightly different perspective as a priest and for that reason I try not to set my expectations too high, but it can sometimes be very disappointing when people don't come to things, don't come forward to volunteer their services, don't seem to want to be involved beyond going to Mass. I don't understand it. It's like having a club membership and not being an active member; a gleaming Rolls and never taking it out of the garage; winning the lottery and burying it in the ground; having a unique talent and never using it.

- Do you manage to get to Mass during the week - could the eucharist be a more regular part of your week?
- Are there areas of parish life, or ministries, or groups you could be involved in?
- Have you participated in recent courses, programmes or activities offered in the parish?
- If not, was it because they didn't appeal to you?

- What courses, groups or activities would appeal - have you suggested them - could you help organise them?

Our parishes will be what we make of them. We are called to do and to give in order to ensure that we also receive; to be active members of worshipping communities that sustain and encourage our faith; to put our God-given talents and abilities at the service of the gospel. (Of course, age, health, or personal circumstances may well place unavoidable limitations on what we are able to do and that is understood.) We may not be passionate about sports, train spotting, knitting or even dates(!), but we ought to be about our faith - it defines who we are and it's a channel for what we do.

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