

The Sound of Silence

No, this isn't about not talking in church – though it possibly should be because the talking continues! This is about a generation, maybe even two, who have little or no idea about “church” and for whom the concept of going to church (whatever the denomination) is foreign to them. There are more people at Sunday morning car boot sales and football matches than there are in our churches.

You may have heard the old conundrum: if a tree falls in a forest and there is no one anywhere around to hear it fall, does it make a noise? From a scientific stand point the answer would be “no”. There has to be someone to hear a noise otherwise it remains just a series of sound waves generated through the air and which will gradually fade the further they travel. It's only if those waves hit someone's eardrums that a sound is generated and therefore, in the case of our theoretical tree, if there is no one around (and therefore no eardrums) then the sound waves produced by the tree falling don't translate into a noise. In short, we can make all the noise we want but it's a complete waste of time unless there is someone there not only to hear, but listening.

I think this is what is happening with “church”. Every Sunday considerable numbers of people go to church but, by and large, it seems to be an isolated activity – it doesn't generate sound waves for others to hear, or the sounds we do produce fall on deaf ears. Those who have gathered in church with determination and conviction (faith) on a Sunday will, as they leave, encounter any number of people passing the church with at least equal, though different, determination and conviction. Seemingly experiencing little or none of the faith (not even curiosity) that draws us into church, they will pass by without giving God or “church” a second thought. It's one of the reasons (in addition to meeting and greeting) why I choose to stand outside after Sunday Mass vested – and the more public the spot the better. Maybe it just might cause people to think about church and about God if only, literally, in passing. Hopefully it's a seed sown that just might take root.

A case in point: I was standing outside of church last Saturday saying goodnight to people as they came out of Mass, when two teenage girls walked past, spoke, and then a few moments later came back to talk to me. One of them asked whether someone could go into church if they hadn't been at the service. I said yes, of course they could. I think she said it was her mother's birthday the next day and she wanted to spend some quiet time in church that day (she didn't actually say praying) if it was going to be open. She might have called in there and then except she was in the middle of a rather large burger and at least she knew she would have had to have finished it first! Happy with the assurance

that she was welcome to call in any time the church was open, she and her friend continued on their way.

While I was quite impressed that she had the courage to stop and ask the question she did, on the surface it was a slightly strange enquiry: the fact that she seemed to think that you had to have been at Mass (or perhaps what she meant was that you had to be a member of the church) otherwise you weren't allowed in. Two questions occurred to me: is that the impression we give as "church", and how many young (and even not so young) people may have the same mistaken idea and therefore never set foot in church? At least we are able to leave both of our churches open during the day so that anyone passing, Catholic or not, can call in and spend some quiet time - whether in prayer or just sitting - and it is surprising just how many people do visit during the course of any one day. An open church door is always better than a locked one and we are fortunate that ours can be open.

However, given that young people these days sadly are absent from so many of our churches, is it any wonder that misconceptions abound, things that may seem somewhat bizarre to us from our perspective as "insiders" (if I can use that word)? And that's the basic problem really: from our "ivory towers" we have a very different perspective on church things and don't always appreciate how different the view is "from the ground" as it were. Without realising it we can take a lot for granted, things that are normal for us, and forget that many others - and especially young people - don't even talk the same language we do. A group of professionals talking to each other using their professional jargon will end up making others feel excluded because they don't understand what is being said. We can do the same to those who are not of our denomination, our faith, our "profession". We have to look at things from the perspective of an outsider and see how it looks to them. We should take nothing for granted.

I have been a practising Catholic ever since I was a little kid. I have always gone to church, even during my teen years when many young people typically stop going. Ever since I can remember I have, therefore, been familiar with what church, and going to church, is all about and, of course, since becoming a priest, church has additionally become my place of work (as it were). Therefore, from a personal perspective, it always seems strange to experience those who quite obviously have no familiarity with church or even how to behave in church - especially a Catholic church and the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. When church is as familiar as it is for a practising Catholic, it's easy to forget that we are the odd ones out and that most people never darken the door of a church except when they have to: for christenings, weddings and funerals - "hatches,

matches and dispatches” as they say.¹

People used to have respect for church and knew what was appropriate and what wasn't. This is quite clearly no longer the case. Let's take funerals for instance. People are there by choice and are generally subdued and respectful, although that doesn't seem to stop the early arrivals from creating a lot of noise talking amongst themselves, clearly having no idea whatsoever of the significance of the tabernacle or the concept of prayer, or of a church being a place of peace and quiet.

Weddings are quite another matter. Most of the people have been invited regardless of any religious affiliation or practice and are there simply for the ceremony. It could just as easily be in the registrar's office, at a hotel, or in a barn for all it matters (they'd probably be happier if it was) and therefore their behaviour is the same in church as it would be in a hotel or a barn - and so is the way they dress. They have absolutely no idea of what is inappropriate in church because ordinarily they have no connection with church; it's a foreign place and a foreign culture. At the same time there is no sensitivity to (or evident respect for) the clearly special place that a church is; there isn't even any caution in the face of unfamiliarity - it's just business as usual.

It is, however, suggested that young people today, even those with no immediate connection with any particular denomination, are (whether they fully recognise it or not) searching for the sacred. There is, as we might say, a space within themselves and their lives that is God-shaped. Somehow they have to be encouraged to experience what that is and what it means, and until we begin to do that as believers, the sort of question I was asked after Mass the other night should come as no surprise. And to the extent to which that doesn't happen, we are leaving yet another generation in its unknowing-ness when it comes to their knowledge of God, of church and of religious practice, another generation that has no idea.

Churches, any churches, are probably a little daunting to non-church-goers. Some of this may have to do with unfamiliar structures, space and symbolism, but there may well also be a degree of guilt and of fear of a God they only know by reputation. To the “uninitiated” churches may also seem a little like private clubs from which those who are not members are excluded, so let us be careful not to make anyone feel excluded. Then, given that even within our own Christian family we don't always understand one another's rites and rituals, how are the un-churched supposed to understand? Churched or un-churched we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, but as long as there is a chance of someone asking “Who?” when we say that, then there is work to be done.

¹ I forget where I heard the following: “They carried you in to church for your christening and they'll carry you out of church at your funeral. Is there any chance of you walking in at some point of your own accord?”

In St Matthew's gospel (13 v14-15) Jesus refers to the prophecy of Isaiah which seems to address the erroneous idea that "where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise":

*You will listen and listen again, but not understand,
see and see again, but not perceive.
For the heart of this nation has grown coarse,
their ears are dull of hearing, and they have shut their eyes,
for fear they should see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their heart,
and be converted and healed by me.*

People close their ears to the gospel message because it demands too much of them. Their "not hearing" then becomes not only habitual but also hereditary. Subsequent generations may not, therefore, know what they are missing, but we have to somehow encourage and invite them to find out – their salvation may depend on it.

If a tree in a forest falls, the airwaves it creates don't translate into sound unless there is someone nearby to hear it. Unless the practice of our faith reaches beyond the walls of our churches and out into the world where the Word is to be proclaimed, then no one is going to hear the sound being generated by our Christian witness. There will just be the sound of silence – and it can be deafening.

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