

Where Are All The People?

The Epiphany process is firstly one of revelation - symbolised by the journey of the Magi to discover the Messiah, in itself a symbol of our own journey of faith as we come to an ever greater discovery of the person of Jesus Christ in our lives. But there is then a further stage to that process as we in turn respond to our Christian vocation to be witnesses to our faith, to be “epiphany” to others as we invite them to experience the reality and presence of Christ in their lives. This is what evangelisation is all about - being a prophet, spreading the Good News, spreading the word, bringing others to a knowledge of Christ, building up the kingdom, vitalising and (where necessary) revitalising the body of Christ from within. That is our call from our baptism.

I think we therefore need to ask the question: where are all the people? To be sustainable, let alone evangelising, our parishes need people. For generations we have been baptising anyone and everyone who came knocking on the presbytery door; children automatically made their first holy communion in entire class groups as soon as they reached age seven; and the same was true of the sacrament of confirmation three years later. How many celebrated each of these sacraments with you? Where are they all now? Why are the pews relatively empty when they should be packed? Apparently the presence of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on the altar under the appearance of bread and wine isn't interesting enough, not even miracle enough, to keep them in the practice of their faith. It has been the best of all possible reasons for two thousand years but not, apparently, for this generation. And avoiding mortal sin, as sad a reason as that is for not missing Mass, no longer seems to matter either. The concept of sin, and in particular serious sin, is no longer fashionable (apparently) and to even mention it is the height of political incorrectness (seemingly). Well, to the best of my knowledge neither the Church, nor God, has made any statement to that effect and so, as in the military, you go with the last order issued...and that would have been by God.

The word of God can sometimes be a bit of a challenge and, as a result, doesn't always sit too well with us. The New Testament book of Revelation records that in the vision he received from God, St John was handed a scroll to eat¹, a scroll that had the word of God written on the front and back. He was told that it would taste sweet as he ate it but that it would turn sour in his stomach. This is often how God's word is experienced – initially with enthusiasm but, later, a little less so when the consequences become more apparent. That was the experience of the young man in the gospel who approached Jesus to ask what he

¹ It's a funny word scroll. It always reminds me of that Morecambe & Wise sketch taking place in either Roman or Shakespearean times. Eric asks: Do you have the scrolls? and Eric answers: No, I always walk like this.” Sorry, as I was saying...

must do to inherit eternal life. He was keen enough to ask the question but afterwards he probably wished he hadn't because the answer he received from Jesus was too much of a challenge for him.

So where are all the people? Well, they are just not going to church anymore. But why? Typically, if you asked them, they would probably blame the Church but then they *are* the church, *we* are church, so is it our fault or is it perhaps their fault? Maybe it's not actually anyone's fault so much as it is a sign of the times – as I was just saying.

I often think back to my school days and the old “penny catechism” much of which we had to learn by heart. It wasn't the best teaching method in the world, but we knew what was what. What are kids learning of their faith in Catholic schools today? I honestly don't know. They seem to know more about other faiths (political correctness again!) than they do about their own. I remarked to one youngster recently that I hadn't seen them at Mass for a while to which the answer was: “I've had a lot of homework”! The concept just wasn't there that we are supposed to be at Mass every Sunday and that that should be a priority. There was certainly no concept of the fact that deliberately missing Mass is seriously (mortally) sinful and is a matter for Confession before we receive communion again. Is no one (parents, teachers, priests) teaching these things anymore?

It is a sad fact of life that there are people who have had very negative experiences of one sort or another that have alienated them from the Church. Such situations could hopefully be put right if parish priests were made aware of them but mind-reading was not on the curriculum at the seminary - someone has to tell us. As long as this continues not to happen, people are depriving themselves of the sacraments and that is a great sadness and one that could very easily be resolved. On the other hand, the vast majority of those who no longer go to church simply stopped going and have never started again and the more time that passes the harder it gets to put the situation right.

Do you know of such people? Could you (gently) approach them and find out whether there is anything that can be done? It doesn't matter how long they have been away, it doesn't even matter why they have been away, what does matter is that, as a faith community, we would like to welcome them back.

It's not just my job as a priest, indeed (as recent papal documents have consistently pointed out) it is more effectively your job because you know who these people are, they are your neighbours, you work with them, you see them in the shops, the café or the pub - and they may find your approach less “threatening” than that of a priest². This, too, is evangelisation because it is

² Even a nice priest like me!

bringing a very special word of God to people that will hopefully encourage them back to the practice of their faith, build up the body of Christ, and make our faith community just that little bit more sustainable for the future.

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