



Keeping our Churches and Faith Communities Open and Alive

Patrick Claffey

When I'm travelling, particularly in France, I like to visit churches. These can be either the 'great churches' or cathedrals, with great organs, but often also the smaller, simpler places of prayer, often small Romanesque churches along old parts of the Camino, or plain parish churches, though these are now sadly often closed apart from mass times.

It can be thought of as a form of tourism. However it also has a deeper purpose and is, I believe, quite a common and popular form of personal spirituality. It is something that can be practised by both believers and those who are on the margins, with one foot in faith and the other in doubt or, indeed, sometimes those who can be called simply 'unbelievers', those to whom the gift of faith does not seem to have been given—or not yet.

Here in those moment, often just inside the door, we practice what I like to call *the spirituality of the lighted candle*, most often before a statue of Our Lady, or in times of urgent need St Anthony (my late father's 'man'). This reminds me of my close late friend M, who held a position of believing without belonging to the institution in the more traditional sense. This is not uncommon but it is important to acknowledge it in our time. However, M was, as she'd say 'a great woman for the candles', and the small thought that may be as near to a prayer as she got, usually offered for a family member or 'a friend in trouble' or some very private need that lay unexpressed in her heart. This too is important, the thoughts and the prayers are real. She may well also have had a *Memorare* card tucked away in her wallet for one of those crisis moments.

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thy intercession, was left unaided. Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee, O Virgin of virgins, my Mother.

If only for these moments we should keep our churches open to the public as much as possible and bring these prayers into our prayers.

On these travels, I like to simply go to Sunday mass, that is to sit in the pews. This gives a completely different perspective and is often very edifying even when there are very few people. This is particularly the case in the Paris churches which I love, particular St Sulpice. The Parish of St Francois Xavier, near les Invalides, which I went to on the feast of the Epiphany was an excellent example of how a modern, but at the same time quite traditional Sunday celebration, can and should be done. This very large 19th c. church, holding c. 600 people, is very beautiful and well maintained. The organ, a magnificent instrument, dates from the late 19th century. The cantor, the parish choir and congregational singing are very inspiring. The homily was very well prepared with five concise points. It was very well delivered in clear and accessible language, but in no way patronising or dogmatic. It was listened to with real interest and attention. The homilist had something to say and said it very well. This matters.

It's hardly surprising then that the church was absolutely packed even in secular France where the rate of religious practice languishes. While 60% of French people self-identify as Christian only 4-6% of Catholics practice regularly. So what was going on here to make it so different? The most interesting observation was the make-up of the congregation: children, adolescents, students, professionals, young parents, grand parents. The friend who invited me to join her at her parish is a 28 year-old financial specialist with the European Development Banks is a good example of a serious, modern engagement with faith that is very impressive. They wanted to be there, they need it

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The celebration was prayerful and participative. The readings were very well done, the eight ministers of the Eucharist were well trained, devout and very aware of their role, and efficient. The single collection with credit card machines was very effective and brief.

Of course, as a 'professional', during these visits I am often throwing studious eye over what I see, and marking our own parish off against it and noting things that I think might be of interest or would improve our own services.

As our own Christmas liturgies showed, St Mary's, a beautiful church, is doing quite well, ticking off several boxes with high marks, notably in relation to music but also general presentation.

What is most concerning in our case, as with nearly all parishes in Dublin is the fall-off in any kind of interfacing with young people and the rapid ageing of our congregation.

Through personal observation and anecdotal evidence, there is a definite decline in the numbers, if one excludes both the Croatian and French communities. Sunday collections have declined by as much as 25%, from an average of about €1200 before Covid to recent averages of about €900 in the First Collection, with similar percentage decline in the Share Collection, Dues collections have followed a similar if not much sharper decline and the November masses tradition has all but disappeared.

St Mary's remains a living community despite the challenges, it has a beating heart. But it's certainly a time for both reflection and action as we look to the future. Our structures need to be examined and renewed, our ministries need new members and support. This synodal period we are living through should inspire us to look again, and listen better to what the Spirit is saying to us in our times.

Mass Intentions.

Recently deceased

Sean (Jack) O'Dwyer CBE, Derry

Father of our PPC Treasurer, Sean O'Dwyer, Wellington Rd

21 January

11am Ita & Larry Connaughton, their daughter Kit & grandson John

5pm Jack Connor

Masses Times

Sundays: 9.30am, 11am, 5pm

Weekdays: 10am

Rosary following 10am mass



French Mass 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month

Collections Last Sunday

1st Collection €725; Share €535

THANKS YOU

The Patrick Finn Lectures 2024



Synod
2021
2024

For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP

THE SYNOD

A WORD TO THE WORLD

St Mary's Parish Church, Haddington Road, Dublin 4

Thursday 1 February 2024, 7pm

Admission is Free

(A collection will be taken to defray costs and contributions will be welcome)

Timothy Radcliffe is a well-known theologian and spiritual author who looks at the questions that many Christians ask in living out the faith. At the request of Pope Francis he led the three day preparatory retreat for participants in the Synod on Synodality in Rome, as well as delivering weekly spiritual reflections, last October.

He is the author of many books and articles in the popular field of practical Christianity, the most recent being *Why Go To Church* (2009), *Alive in God* (2019) and *Questioning God* (with Lukasz Popko, 2023).

He was ordained a priest in the Dominican Order (OP) in 1971, and subsequently was based at the west London Catholic Chaplaincy. He taught scripture at Oxford, and was elected provincial of the Order of Preachers in England in 1988. In 1992 he was elected master [Superior General] of the Dominican Order, holding that office up to 2001."

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