

The staunch Catholics with no time for Mass

Pope Francis is the first pontiff in recent history not to have participated in the Second Vatican Council. But the imprint of post-conciliar ecclesiology is very apparent in his own thinking and speaking about the Church. He is clearly familiar with the “models of the Church” as articulated by his fellow Jesuit, Avery Dulles (who was named a cardinal by Pope John Paul II). Francis has even added his own “model” to those proposed by Dulles: that of the Church as a field hospital. This image chimes with Francis’s preference for a Church of engagement, on the front lines of contemporary society and tending to the wounded in our midst.

This model resonates with my own experience, but it has also got me thinking about an ancillary model of the Church, or at least the parish, which has come into being in this corner of the Lord’s vineyard. It’s what I call “the Church as medical practice”. Allow me to explain what I mean by this.

The parish of St Joseph’s, in which providence and the Bishop of Paisley have placed me as shepherd, is fairly well attended. We have around 800 people through the doors each Sunday. Of course, like most parishes, not all of these are from within the territorial boundaries of St Joseph’s. A significant number of “incomers” are prepared to offset the turgid preaching against the conveniently early-evening Mass times. This leaves a considerable number of local Catholics who do not attend Mass here (or anywhere else, for that matter).

These are the parents of the children in my primary school and the high school of which I’m chaplain. We chat at the school gates or at a variety of social events over the course of the year. These are perfectly decent folk who would not let me pass in the street without a friendly greeting while I’m out walking the parish pooch. Theirs are the households to which I’m summoned to administer the Last Rites to a hitherto unknown parishioner or to arrange a funeral which, almost without exception, absolutely must take place in the church itself.

In fact, it’s usually funerals that bring about the most sustained and, to my mind, rewarding contact. Visiting these bereaved families, you realise that these people on the margins of the parish have absolutely no sense whatsoever of being marginal to anything. As you glance around the room,



‘Practice Catholics’ are conspicuous by their absence from the pews

you might see a picture of the Sacred Heart rubbing shoulders with a Daniel O’Donnell calendar or a grandchild’s school photo. The marks of an inherited Catholicism are plain to see in their homes, even if they themselves are conspicuous by their absence from the pews.

And there’s the rub. Even after a “lovely send-off”, for which profuse and sincere thanks are forthcoming, the chances of seeing these families back at Mass next Sunday are practically nil.

If you ask if they’re still Catholics in any serious sense, you might get punched

Now, it’s not for want of gentle hints and express invitations to join us once more. It’s just that, for a majority of Catholics in this neck of the woods, their relationship with the Church has changed. Since we stopped using a language of obligation around Mass attendance – and some might argue as a direct result of more coercive strategies – the numbers attending Mass have fallen precipitously.

But don’t for a minute suggest to these people that they are “lapsed” (a word we use frequently but which has practically no meaning for them) or, worse still, have the temerity to question if they are actually

“still Catholics” in any serious sense. Not only would they be affronted, you might also get punched. The Church and the parish are still an absolutely vital part of the community and their lives, but it’s a fundamentally different relationship from that of even a generation ago.

The folk hereabouts know which “practice” they’re under and they are very loyal to it. They know the Church is there for them when they are in pain or when they need help and they are deeply grateful for the support it offers them. But I reckon that most of them would no more consider “coming back” to Church after a bereavement than they would turn up at their doctor’s surgery to say they’re feeling much better now, thanks. That’s simply not how their relationship with the Church works nowadays.

Naturally, this throws up lots of questions and not a few challenges. It makes the work of inviting people to be a part of the life of the parish that bit trickier, especially if you’re also trying to make that message clear at other “entry points” such as baptism and the other sacraments. Furthermore, it challenges us to find ways to make people aware that opting out of Mass isn’t a neutral lifestyle choice, like so many others nowadays. There are negative effects, as well as missed graces.

But I think it also means that we, as clergy and lay people working in the field of outreach, need to be less hard on ourselves if we think that our best efforts are not really producing results in the return of “lapsed” Catholics. It’s just that most wouldn’t see themselves in that position at all. I suspect that what we have in most Catholic communities is a minority of “practising Catholics” and a considerable majority of “practice Catholics”.

It’s a pity that the good Cardinal Dulles has gone to his reward, for I would dearly love to get a modest contribution, along with that of Pope Francis, into a future edition of his *Models of the Church*. While the field hospital Church sits at the acute end of pastoral provision, I reckon that most of us “spiritual GPs” will increasingly recognise our ministries in those words of Jesus: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (Luke 5:31).

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