

OUTREACH TO THE NON-CHURCHGOING AND THE UNCHURCHED

I offer a few thoughts on “Outreach to the Non-Churchgoing and the Unchurched” (20-25 mins). The term ‘non-churchgoing’ is used here to mean baptised Catholics who do not practice, and ‘unchurched’ to mean non-Catholic people without a spiritual home. 3 points: (1) data; (2) evangelisation; and (3) practical strategies.

1. Data

First, data. The ONS Census reports for England and Wales for 2001 and 2011 are interesting (here arranged in size of congregations):

	2001		2011	
		Of population		Of population
Christians	42.08M	71.75%	33.2M	59.3%
Muslims	1.55M	2.97%	2.7M	4.8%
Hindus	0.552M	1.06%	0.817M	1.5%
Sikh	0.329M	0.63%	0.423M	0.8%
Jews	0.260M	0.50%	0.263M	0.5%
Buddhist	0.144M	0.28%	0.248M	0.4%
Other	0.150M	0.29%	0.240M	0.4%
No religion	9.1M	14.81%	14.1M	25.1%
<i>Not answered in census</i>	4.04M	7.71%	4.04M	7.2%
<i>Total population</i>	52.4M		56.1M	

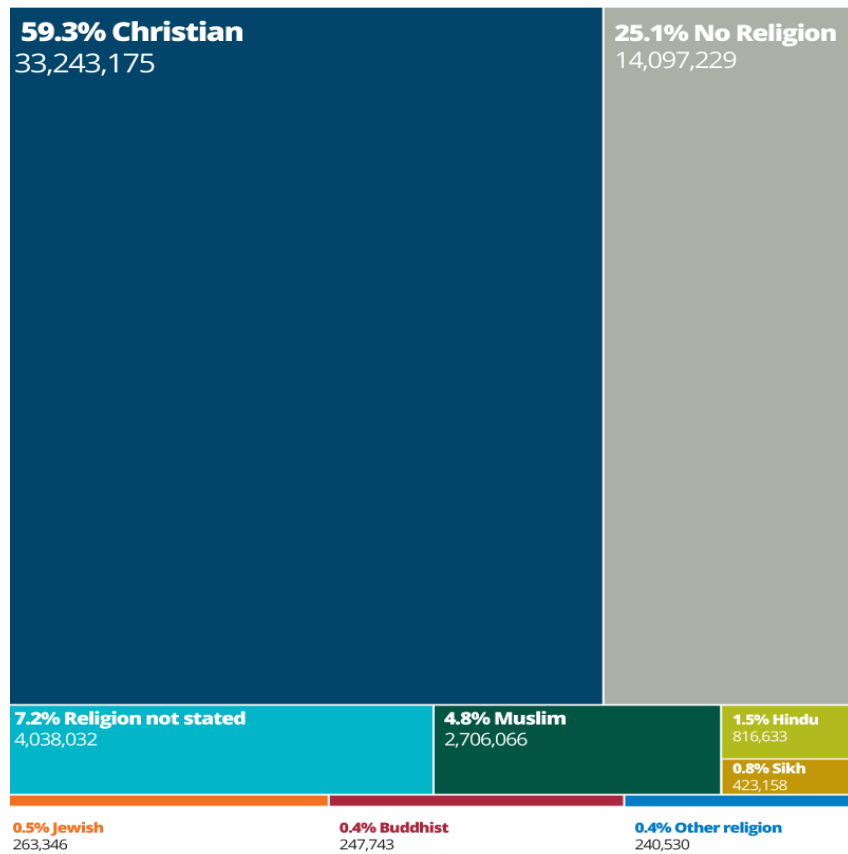
There are three headlines here:

- the decline of Christianity: from 72% to 59% which, if it continues, means that by the end of this decade, Christians will be in a minority;
- the growth of Islam: from 3% to 5%, making Islam the fastest growing religious group; and
- the exponential growth of ‘nones’ (people of no religious affiliation): up from 15% in 2001 to 25%. A quarter of the population now says it has no religion.

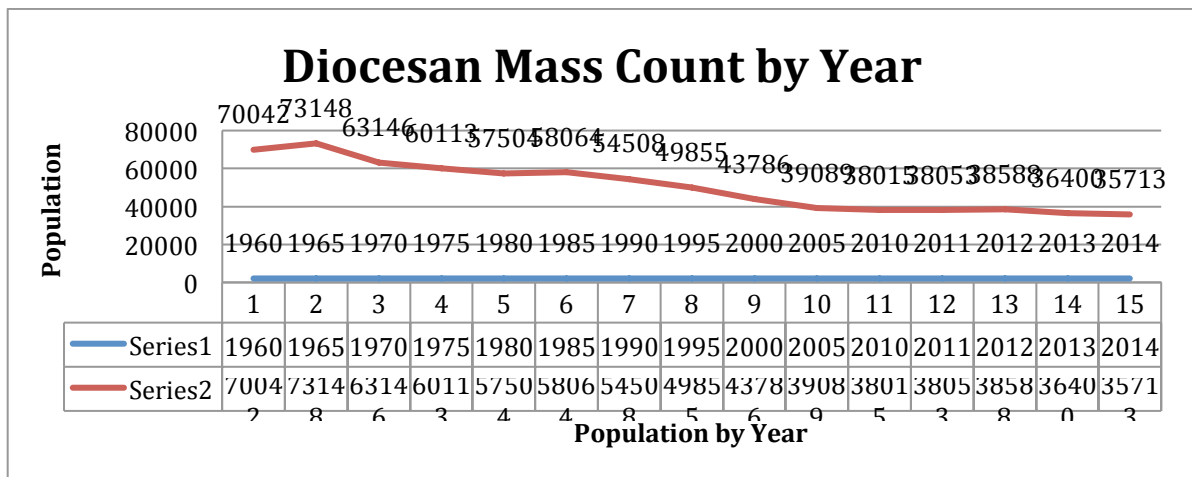
There are interesting local variations. Knowsley, Merseyside, has the highest proportion of Christians (81%) and Tower Hamlets, London the highest proportion of Muslims (35%, 7 times the average). Norwich has the highest proportion of ‘nones’ (42%). Interestingly, the area around Portsmouth and Havant also has a lot of ‘nones’.

The following infogram illustrates the results:

Headline figures from the 2011 Census



Most Christians are Anglicans. Catholics constitute about 1 in 12 or 8% of population, 4.5M. Regular (once a month) church attendance - although a notoriously difficult statistic to measure reliably - is 1.6M attendees, about 5% of the population (1 in 20). In England and Wales, then, there are huge numbers of ‘unchurched.’ In the Diocese of Portsmouth, the general population is 3.1M, of whom perhaps 8% are baptised Catholics: 248,000. 35,500 practice. In other words, the practice rate is 14%. There are huge numbers of ‘inactive’ Catholics. In the Diocese, the practice rate has been plummeting. Over the last 25 years, attendance at Sunday Mass has gone down from 54,500 to 35,500:



It would arguably be more instructive to tabulate the trend for adult baptisms and for receptions into full communion. In 2014, in the Diocese of Portsmouth, there were 320 baptisms and receptions: miniscule in view of the 3.1M population?

The challenge of evangelisation is enormous. Leaving aside religious minorities, most people in England and Wales are un-churched. Most Christians and 85% of Catholics are non-churchgoing. Moreover, these bare statistics can mask the magnitude of the challenge. In Portsmouth over the last 25 years, especially its urban centres, there has been a massive influx of immigrant Catholic groups such as Filipinos, Keralans, Poles which suggests that much of the former Anglo-Irish constituency has evaporated.

It is helpful to work from statistics, although there are limits. Evangelisation is not about numbers. The Lord never promised full churches; indeed, if anything He seemed to envisage the Christian community as a small band. Yet the Church is incarnate and so numbers do have some significance for the Church's internal functioning and its external mission. Evidently, the Church has been losing ground. How to respond? Can something be done? How can the non-churchgoing be reached and reconciled? How might there be an effective outreach to the un-churched?

2. New Evangelisation

Some notes about evangelisation. We need first to differentiate three elements or moments of evangelisation: (1) religious experience, the grace of Christ touches a person's heart, rousing them to faith; then (2) on-going conversion, catechesis and formation in discipleship; and (3) sacramentalisation (Baptism, Confirmation and Penance/Eucharist) and insertion into the life of the Christian community. These three elements (encounter, catechesis, sacraments), the fruit of God's grace, are comparable to falling-in-love, getting engaged, marriage and family life. In the RCIA, typically the enquirer has had a religious experience; they then receive catechesis; the process culminates at the Easter Vigil with the sacraments and insertion into parish life.

For many cradle Catholics these three moments are reversed: sacramentalised at birth, then catechised later, it could be asked: when were they evangelised? In outreach to the non-churchgoing and the un-churched that first moment (encounter) is critical, especially when such people come to request sacraments, prayers, blessings or funeral liturgies. In Luke 18:8, Jesus asks: "When the Son of Man comes, will He find any faith on earth?" The key issue today is a crisis of faith and how we might rouse people to faith and to expect God's gift of His love in religious experience. Whilst entrusting everything to God's grace, we need to connect with people's religious sense. We need to create the conditions – and to keep creating the conditions - in which they can encounter the Mystery of Christ and so want the Truth and Life He offers. Often, say in baptism preparation, the focus is on verbal catechesis or the details of the celebration, but not on 'religion' - on theology, but without creating the conditions for religious experience. The issue is now to help people learn the art of praying, to find

God, to experience the love of God, to develop a personal-passionate friendship with Jesus Christ, to grasp the meaning of His death and resurrection, to have a sense of being personally called to be a disciple. Catholics have huge resources for this in two millennia of spiritual theology, the wisdom and lives of the saints, and a rich and diverse Tradition.

It is also important to underline that evangelisation and new evangelisation (NE) is not about devising new schemes or programmes. As JP2 said in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 29

“We are certainly not seduced by the naive expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance He gives us: I am with you! It is not therefore a matter of inventing a ‘new programme.’”

Evangelisation is a Person, Jesus Christ and NE is about a transforming encounter with Him, with a sense of being called to be His disciple within His Body, the Church.

Again, NE is not ecclesio-centric but Christo-centric. The aim is not to enhance the institution of the Church, to fill the pews, to build up parish structures and ministries, or to enlist more helpers, say, to run the Children’s Liturgy. It is about making Jesus Christ better known and better loved, spreading His teaching, attracting people to His Way of Life. Catholics have much to learn here from evangelical Christians. The aim is not to build up missionary parishes but missionary disciples. A parish is not an end in itself. It is more like a chaplaincy equipped with what is needed to communicate the Gospel effectively. Even the word ‘pastoral’ is often reduced to service rather than communication. In the past, clergy acted as ‘chaplains to the Catholic community’ and the faithful were ‘consumers of the sacraments provided.’ The NE requires a change of mind-set. The faithful need to become missionary-disciples and the clergy mission-directors. After Vatican II, there was a strong focus on the Church, on building up the Church, on lay ministries and Church structures. NE, however, means focusing less on the Church of the Lord and more on the Lord of the Church.

Evangelisation is ever bi-directional, like breathing-in and breathing-out. It is about ourselves being evangelised – a life-long process - as much as ourselves evangelising and reaching out to others. The challenge is not a shortage of priests but a shortage of people, that is, people who are truly converted to Christ, who truly love Him above all and who wish to spread the Gospel to others. We need more Catholics who are personally and passionately in love with Jesus Christ, formed in the Scriptures and worshipping the Lord in the Holy Eucharist. In this way we will, have the resources we need to tackle the challenges ahead.

Evangelisation always has a double intention. Its proximate goal is the individual, but its ultimate goal is to baptise culture. Christ calls individuals to follow Him, incorporating them into His Body the Church, but the Church as His Body is meant to be a ‘leaven in the dough’ (Lk 13: 20-21), permeating, guiding and fulfilling the culture with Christian meanings and values, as Christ Himself did for the Jewish culture. In this regard, there are four particular challenges the Church faces in evangelising contemporary British culture and these deserve specific attention:

- first, secularism or more exactly, the wrong type of secularism: a hard-core secularism that seeks to drive religion out of the public domain and ring-fence religion to the private. This restricts human freedom and self-expression.
- secondly, scientism, the false philosophical claim that empirical science alone can yield the truth, whereas religion is just personal opinion. This truncates human knowledge and undermines ethics.
- thirdly, relativism and emotivism, the belief that the individual is the ultimate arbiter of truth and goodness. This subverts the common good, corrodes commitment, and threatens the dignity of the human person.
- And fourthly, consumerism, a way of life that canonises economics, promoting ever-increasing consumption within a free market. Pope Francis addresses this in *Laudato Si* as damaging human ecology and damaging the environment.

Evangelisation in Britain means critically engaging with these four challenges: secularism, scientism, relativism and consumerism. These are commonly held positions, usually implicit, even among Catholics, not least in Catholic schools.

3. Strategies

Finally, five strategies for evangelising the non-churchgoing and the unchurched. The aim here is to promote discussion and further ideas.

First, understanding: we need an in-depth understanding of the inner mind of the non-churchgoing and the unchurched, and the categories and demographics of this: the types of people, the reasons they reject religion, the causes of lapsation, the questions raised, and the factors that result in unbelief. This would identify the target constituencies and guide better the deployment of relevant resources. We also need an in-depth study and analysis of our culture, its thinking, trends and developments, its science, media and arts. Every human being seeks happiness and every person is naturally spiritual. We need to identify and make explicit the spiritualities embedded in culture, particularly where those rely on elements of the Christian patrimony.

Secondly, personal contact: evangelisation occurs mainly through friendship and personal contact. In the Early Church, the Faith spread one-to-one through personal contact, business links, family and friends, acquaintances and chance meetings, a classic example being Philip and the eunuch in Acts 8. Personal contact requires personal holiness, confidence and robust formation, the positive ‘tone’ of Good News that Pope Francis models, prayerful discernment and the conviction the Holy Spirit is preparing the Way. The most powerful and easiest outreach is among people Catholics associate with in the work-place, in local charities, with neighbours and friends. The task is to walk alongside, sharing joys and sadness, using the opportunities that arise: e.g. the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, illness or disappointment, a wedding, good news. Often a good Catholic simply becomes known as a good person, a listener, one who cares, a source of blessing, grace and wisdom for others.

Thirdly, visibility: making the Faith more visible: a Rosary in the car, a holy picture on the wall, wearing a crucifix, making the Sign of the Cross before eating, or when passing a church, or upon seeing a hearse. Again, in conversation to say: ‘Thanks be to God’ or ‘Please God’ or ‘I’ll say a prayer for you.’ Digital media are important. The Catholic Tradition is a deep tool-box from which can be drawn things old and new: signs and symbols, Gregorian chant, the saints, icons, new media and 21C artistic commissions. We also need to identify the local *areopagi*: schools and colleges; sporting venues; shopping malls; libraries; housing developments; transport nodes; hotels and conference centres; business and industrial complexes. How can the Church be present and more visible in these *areopagi* in order to engage with them?

Fourthly, forming intentional disciples: helping the Catholic faithful to be more missionary by deepening their sense of discipleship and vocation. This is about transforming the ‘service mentality’ – the parish and its clergy are here to serve me and my needs – into an outward-focused evangelistic mentality. This is a stubborn and difficult attitudinal shift to bring about. Many parishes are static, the same old faces, with little sense of outreach. Where are the new faces? Why not ask people to bring a friend with them to Mass? In the Diocese of Portsmouth, the *Called and Gifted Programme* is designed to help the faithful reflect on their relationship with God, to have a stronger sense of the centrality of Christ, to become an intentional or missionary disciple, and to discern the gifts, talents and charisms God has given them for service. The focus here is not institution-led but person-centred. Another help is to encourage the faithful to belong to a small and formative group, e.g. Bible study, Justice and Peace, a mission-team, and so on.

And finally, encouraging parishes and Catholic schools to undertake simple, do-able mission-projects. Each school and each parish could set up an Evangelisation Strategy Team. Schools serve three constituencies - practicing Catholics, not-yet-practising Catholics and people of good will - and evangelistic strategies could be developed for each constituency. Parishes might undertake a range of projects: leafleting a new housing development, running a food-bank, serving the poor, feeding the homeless, establishing a stall on a local market, visiting retirement homes, using social media, handing out to commuters invitations to an event, organising a ‘Theology on Tap’ session in a local pub, hosting ‘Nightfever’ in a church on a busy thoroughfare, talking with adults at the school gates, celebrating liturgical devotions and prayers, and so on. Doing a Catholic form of street witness – a procession, music, leafleting shops, praying the Rosary – after appropriate formation and training, is a powerful mission-project that can with prayer produce fruits. Even the basic matter of keeping the church open for prayers and visits is a hugely evangelistic activity. Another is making the church building tidy, comfortable, welcoming and easy to use, with a good presence on the internet and in social media.

Summing up, strategies to consider include understanding better the non-churchgoing and unchurched, personal contact, making Catholicism visible, forming the faithful as missionary-disciples, and parishes and schools undertaking mission-projects.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jesus has called each one of us to evangelise, to spread the Good News, to be missionary. But, as JP2 said in *Dominum et Vivificantem* 53, the “wind blows where it wills” offering everyone “in a manner known only to God ... the possibility of being associated with this Paschal Mystery.” That Holy Spirit is at work even now in the heart of every child, woman and man in this land, wooing them towards full communion with Christ and His Church. Let us pray that all our non-churchgoing and unchurched compatriots may find in the Heart of Christ that true, genuine, lasting human happiness and fulfilment for which they long.