

THE CHURCH IN AN INDIVIDUALISTIC SOCIETY

I thank Archbishop Malcolm, Dr. Peter McGrail and all of you for inviting me to speak. The topic is ‘The Church in an Individualistic Society’ and whilst considering the philosophical and theological aspects, given that this talk is a contribution to the Archdiocesan Synod, I also wish to root it in a pastoral context. So three points: first, something on the secular ‘individualistic’ culture we live in, secondly, how the Church might respond, and thirdly, some practical measures that Catholics might take.

1. Living in a Secular ‘Individualistic’ Culture

So to begin: Why does the church seem to be full of the elderly: where are the young? Why is it that out of, say, 40 children for First Holy Communion, only two go to Mass? Why is it, as Stephen Bullivant noted in his recent book *Mass Exodus*, so few Catholics nowadays practice: in the Diocese of Portsmouth, just 13%?¹ Why is it that almost half of those undertaking RCIA subsequently lapse? Why is it, as Sherry Weddell observes in her *Forming Intentional Disciples*, almost 40% of the congregation, even leading parishioners, even those in upfront parish ministries, are unsure God exists, that God is personal and that they can have a life-changing relationship with Him?²

Over the last five or six decades, Britain has quietly undergone a massive religious shift, a revolution arguably comparable in historical significance to that of the Reformation. Britain has become secular, a land of mass unbelief. In his recent book *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West*, the sociologist Callum Brown charts the quiet but spectacular collapse of religion following the cultural, social and sexual revolutions of the ‘long sixties,’ the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s.³ The ‘Swinging Sixties’ saw the emergence of youth-culture, the music of the Beatles (1962), the contraceptive pill, the legalisation of abortion and homosexuality (1967), the women’s liberation movement (1968), easier divorce and so on, which subsequently have led to the demise of the traditional family. In his earlier book *The Death of Christian Britain*, Brown correlated the decline of Christianity with the changing social status of women, with new attitudes towards sex, fertility, education and work.⁴ The British have now largely lost their faith; they have dropped their Christian beliefs, church connections and religious practices; millions now live, to use the Scholastic phrase, *etsi Deus non daretur*, ‘as if there is no God.’ The 2011 National Census⁵ and data from the 2015 British Social Attitudes

¹ See S. Bullivant *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America Since Vatican II* (Oxford UP: 2019). See also, S. Bullivant et al *Why Catholics Leave, What They Miss and How They Might Return* (New York, Paulist: 2019).

² See S. Weddell *Forming Intentional Disciples. The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington, Our Sunday Visitor: 2012) 15-47. Cf. M. Sweeney and S. Weddell *The Parish: Mission or Maintenance* (Colorado Springs, Catherine of Siena Institute: 2000) and S. Weddell *Making Disciples; Equipping Apostles* (Colorado Springs, Catherine of Siena Institute: 2000)

³ C. Brown *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London, Bloomsbury: 2017)

⁴ C. Brown *The Death of Christian Britain* (London, Routledge: 2001)

⁵ See www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/index.html (February 2020).

Survey confirm that 48% of the population now say they are ‘nones,’ people of no religion, meaning anything from atheism or agnosticism to humanism and indifference.⁶

No longer Christian, a secular culture now prevails, although the terms secular, secularism and secularisation, like ‘individualism’ and ‘materialistic,’ are ill-defined and often a bit watery. Secularism is more of an attitude or an atmosphere than a fully worked-out philosophy or system of thought. Essentially, it means a concern with the *saeculum*, the world, *this* world, rather than the next. Secularism is about living life ‘horizontally,’ without God and the ‘vertical’ dimension of religion, without, to use the phrase of Peter Berger, a ‘sacred canopy.’⁷ The loss of religion, however, is not to suggest a loss of values. The new culture is humanistic, with strong, liberal values: the Golden Rule (‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’),⁸ justice, equality, respect for all regardless of race, gender and disability, the recognition of all sexualities, the freedom to determine fertility and family, a woman’s right to choose, the right to assisted suicide or ‘dignity in dying,’ and increasingly a concern for ecology and climate.⁹ It esteems being ‘good without God.’ Many of these values of course are post-Christian values, but now free-wheeling, stripped from their theological moorings.

Secularism permits religion but it marginalises and ring-fences it to the private domain. Its key axiom is a strict separation of Church and State, religion and politics. Whilst most people are indifferent – live and let live - some, such as *Stonewall* and *The National Secular Society*, deride Christianity, seeking systematically to exclude religious expression from schools, institutions and public life: not freedom *of* religion but freedom *from* religion. But generally, as long as behaviour is within the law, policy makers adopt a neutral attitude towards religions. Religion - the meaning of life, values to do with self, sexuality and the family, what is morally right, the existence of God and life after death - is ‘ring-fenced’ and treated as a private affair.

Even so, religion is never far away: scratch the surface and water wells up. Christian beliefs and values still linger,¹⁰ surfacing on public occasions, at royal weddings and at funerals.¹¹ Since 9/11, the world situation has changed and the political issue of religion has become more discussed. In Western Europe, Christianity is in decline, but in other parts of the world, religion, including Christianity, is in the ascendant. Islam is growing stronger, so too Buddhism.¹² Globalisation has made the world smaller; thanks to easier travel, the internet, smartphones, there is now greater contact between peoples. Modern Britain has experienced substantial immigration, with a plurality of religions, a supermarket of religions on the doorstep. In the Diocese of Portsmouth, Mass attendance has remained stable because the Anglo-Irish, most now lapsed, have

⁶ See S. Bullivant *Catholic Research Forum Reports 3: The ‘No Religion’ Population of Britain* (London, St. Mary’s University Twickenham: 2016).

⁷ See R. Fisichella *The New Evangelisation: Responding to the Challenge of Indifference* (Leominster, Gracewing: 2012), especially 25-48. Cf. P. Berger *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, Doubleday: 1967)

⁸ Mark 12:28-29; cf. Tob 4: 16

⁹ C. Brown *Becoming Atheist 2*; see also 171f.

¹⁰ G. Davie *Religion in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford, Blackwell: 1994)

¹¹ G. Smith *A Short History of Secularism* (London, Tauris: 2010)

¹² See, for example, the Dhanakosa Monastery founded in 1993 near Callander in the Highlands: www.dhanakosa.com (February 2020)

been replaced by Poles, Keralans, Filipinos and Nigerians. Today, many parts of Britain are thoroughly multicultural and potentially multi-religious.

Secularism has three fatal or self-defeating flaws. First, a distorted understanding of what it means to be human, a false anthropology. Spirituality, religion, prayer and religious expression are intrinsic to human being: to deny, ignore or truncate the religious sense is to skew human development and restrict freedom of conscience. Moreover, religion grounds ethics, and so a loss of religion dissolves the foundations of morality. Without religion and the natural law, novel free-wheeling concepts of right and wrong, of sexuality and family-life, of the dignity and value of human life, begin to emerge. To lose God is to lose man, as St. John Paul II argued;¹³ without religion, humans no longer see themselves as creatures but Promethean creators.

Consequently, secularism leads to what Pope Benedict called the ‘dictatorship of relativism’.¹⁴ Relativism is the view that truth is relative: what is true for you is not true for me. Because truth has no basis in religion or the natural law, it depends on what I think or feel. The spectre of dictatorship arises when the State endorses one group’s claims over another. This can be seen in recent debates over abortion, gay marriage and assisted suicide. What is good or right is determined by lawyers. A growing totalitarianism in secular societies is inevitable as the loss of faith dissolves the foundations of ethics.¹⁵ Think of the British legal system, moulded over centuries by Christianity and the natural law. Today, it is crafted by politicians and lawmakers, educators, health-care professionals, pressure-groups, media and business interests, for whom the common traditional values have little weight. They lobby for what is expedient - or what they can get away with. The law is now increasingly adrift, whilst an ever-rising tide of bureaucratic rules and regulations is enforced that express the will of the legislator, the will of campaigners, the will of a focus group.

And thirdly, secularism gives rise to bogus epistemologies, theories about knowledge. The demise of religion, as St. John Paul II argued in *Fides et Ratio*, his Encyclical on

¹³ See John Paul II *Redemptor Hominis* (London, CTS: 1979)

¹⁴ In 2005, in a homily at Mass to the cardinals who had come to Rome to elect the new pope, the then Cardinal Ratzinger, said:

“Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labelled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be “tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine”, seems the only attitude [appropriate to] modern times. Yet [in this] we are building a dictatorship of relativism that recognizes nothing as definitive, and whose ultimate goal consists solely in one’s own ego and desires.
We, however, have a different goal: the Son of God, the true man. He is the measure of true humanism.”

See: Mass *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice: Homily of Card. Joseph Ratzinger Dean of the College of Cardinals Vatican Basilica Monday 18 April 2005*, available on-line www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html (February 2020).

¹⁵ Interestingly, on a visit to the Vatican in 2012, Baroness Varsi, notably a Muslim, said that Europe needed to become more confident in its Christian identity in order to encourage a greater social cohesion:

“... [To] encourage social harmony, people need to feel stronger in their religious identities, more confident in their beliefs. ... Too often there is a suspicion of faith in our continent, where signs of religion cannot be displayed or worn in government buildings, where ... faith is sidelined, marginalised and downgraded. It all hinges on a basic misconception: That somehow to create equality and space for minority faiths and cultures, we need to erase our majority religious heritage.”

(slightly adapted). See www.gov.uk/government/speeches/baroness-warsi-speech-in-the-holy-see (February 2020).

the relationship of faith and reason, leads logically to the demise of reason.¹⁶ This is the basis of the individualism so characteristic of modern society. Without reason and without religion, nihilism and hedonism, escape and pleasure, inevitably dominate. The alternative reaction is the *sola ratio* of scientism, an excessive trust in science and technology. More than anything else, a distorted view of science has now come to pervade British education, the media and popular culture: the belief that science alone tells the truth, whereas religion, wisdom, common sense, tradition and other forms of knowledge are deemed personal predilections, like a particular taste in music.

Secularism deprives the British of spiritual resources they might easily turn to. While laudably many new minority religions have been accommodated, Christianity, the religion of the majority, has been relegated as one possible religion among others. Replacing in schools the study of Christianity with comparative religion leaves students religiously illiterate.¹⁷ Today's youth have little basic knowledge of Britain's Christian heritage or even her Christmas carols. Cut off from their roots, they drift. Disaffected, they become prey to radicalisation.¹⁸

In the recent General Election, there was much talk about Brexit, the NHS, HS2 and so on, but nothing about the most radical poverty of all: the lack of a proper relationship with God. There was nothing on supporting spirituality, religion, faith-communities, churches. Every human being aspires to be happy, to be loved, to belong, to live forever. Humans are built for this, yet, as St. Augustine once said, none of this is possible without a relationship with God.¹⁹ This is where Christianity can respond to humanity's deepest longings. It gives friendship with Christ, immortality, a sense of belonging within His Body the Church. It gives the grace, energy and power to do the impossible, to bear sickness, suffering, sadness, even death. It gives meaning and purpose; it grounds ethics; it builds community; it encourages self-sacrifice and service of the poor. It offers the glue that fosters social cohesion. Catholics face many challenges in Britain but surely the greatest is secularism, living in a secular culture, breathing a secular atmosphere. How then might the Church respond?

2. The Church's response and the New Evangelisation

¹⁶ See John Paul II *Faith and Reason: Encyclical Letter Fides et Ratio* (London, CTS: 1998), especially n. 46

¹⁷ As an example, take the word 'equality.' In its 2013 document *Religion or Belief and the Workplace* the Equalities and Human Rights Commission fails to differentiate between religion on the one hand, and personal life-style choices on the other. This is typical of a secular approach, in which every religion and every choice is treated as absolutely identical of equal value. Consequently, vegetarianism, environmentalism, even wearing a beard, are equated with classic religions such as Judaism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. This is not only an offence to those who are members of these religions, but it expresses an absolutist view of equality: that equality means sameness, not complementarity and difference. In the document, the religion of a tiny minority, Druidism, is valued identically with the religion of the majority, Christianity, and thus disproportionately. Yet, it is an historical fact that the core of British values are based not on Druidism, but on Christianity. See Equality and Human Rights Commission *Equality or Belief in the Workplace: An Explanation of Recent European Court of Human Rights Judgments* (2013) available on-line at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/religion-or-belief-workplace-explanation-recent-european-court-human-rights> (February 2020)

¹⁸ See *Catholic World Report*: 'Europe will be adrift if it loses Christian roots, faith leaders warn' (March 3rd, 2017): www.catholicworldreport.com/2017/03/03/europe-will-be-adrift-if-it-loses-christian-roots-faith-leaders-warn (February 2020)

¹⁹ "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Augustine *Confessions* Lib 1, 1-2, 2.5, 5 (CSEL 33, 1-5). This passage appears in the Liturgy of the Hours Office of Readings for the Ninth Sunday of the Year.

Reading the Catholic press might suggest that the Church faces a ‘crisis of institution:’ if only the ordination of women deacons was permitted, celibacy became optional, the divorced and remarried were readmitted to the sacraments, if only the Latin Mass was restored or the previous translation of the *Roman Missal*, all will be well. These are important matters. But the real and most urgent challenge the Church faces is not a crisis of institution but a crisis of faith: the crisis of faith in secular culture and the corresponding impact of this crisis on the life of the Church.

In his 1962 address opening the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII stated that the Council’s purpose was to evangelise more effectively the modern world.²⁰ The internal change in the Church was needed for the sake of its external outreach. In the immediate aftermath of the Council, Catholics became self-absorbed with changing structures, but in 1975, after the Synod of Bishops the year before, Pope St. Paul VI issued a document called *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, which sought to infuse the whole Church with a new missionary consciousness. In it, he famously said:

“Evangelising is the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. [The Church] exists in order to evangelise, that is, to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace.”²¹

In effect *Evangelii Nuntiandi* would reject a static, institutional, maintenance-model of the Church in favour of a more missionary-minded evangelistic approach, what George Weigel calls an ‘Evangelical Catholicism’²². This new missionary awareness became central to St. John Paul II, to Pope Benedict, who spoke often of the role of faith within Western society, and to Pope Francis, who in *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si* has tethered mission to human need, service of the poor and an integral ecology.

Against this general background, JP2, in an address in 1983, coined a new theological term. What is needed today, he said, is a new evangelisation (NE), an evangelisation “new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression.”²³ He had in mind a growing disquiet about the situation of the Church in Europe, where countries of ancient Christian origin such as France and Germany were being rapidly de-Christianised. The rise of secularism, atheism and indifferentism was turning the Church into a minority. The Gospel was being preached, sacraments conferred, but people were lapsing from practice; they were not in a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.²⁴ A new evangelisation and a re-evangelisation was needed. The term NE has since appeared frequently in Vatican documents and was taken up by Pope Benedict and Pope Francis. Indeed, in 2010 Benedict established a Pontifical Council for NE and devoted the 2012 Synod of Bishops to this theme.²⁵ Its final Propositions

²⁰ See Pope John XXIII *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*: Address on the occasion of the solemn opening of the Most Holy Council (October 11, 1962) - at https://vatican2voice.org/91docs/opening_speech.htm (February 2020)

²¹ Paul VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in H. Denzinger *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (43rd Edition) ed. P. Hünermann (San Francisco, Ignatius Press: 2010) DH 4573

²² G. Weigel *Evangelical Catholicism* (New York, Basic Books: 2013).

²³ John Paul II “The Task of the Latin American Bishop”, Address to CELAM, 9th March 1983; English translation in *Origins* 12 (4 March 1983) 659-62.

²⁴ See John Paul II *Redemptoris Missio* (London, CTS: 1990) 33; cfr. Congregation for the Clergy *General Directory for Catechesis* (London, CTS: 1997) 58-9

²⁵ For its Final Propositions, see <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/final-list-of-propositions-of-the-synod-of-bishops> (February 2020)

formed the basis of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis's 2015 Apostolic Exhortation that summed up the work of the Synod and enhanced it with considerations of his own.²⁶

So what is this 'NE?' Evangelisation (from the Greek ευαγγελιον, 'glad tidings' and ευαγγελιζομαι, 'to announce Good News') means essentially the Spirit-filled presentation of the Person of Jesus Christ and His Gospel in such a way as to elicit a faith response in the recipient by which they too encounter Jesus for themselves, convert their life and enter into a life-long discipleship and friendship with Him, within His Body, the Church. Classically, this was meant to happen over time as a person was brought up within a Catholic family, received the sacraments, Baptism, Confession, First Holy Communion and Confirmation, through Catholic schooling and going to Mass, through saying set prayers in the morning and evening, by becoming involved in the life of the parish, perhaps as an altar server or reader, through undertaking Catholic charity work, by marrying another Catholic and living in accord with the teachings of the Church. It is precisely this model of evangelisation that has largely broken down. The Gospel *has* been preached but thwarted. Many have been baptised but no longer practice; sacramentalised, they are not evangelised. They may be still be loosely connected to the Church through the school, but are not in a living personal relationship with Christ in the Eucharist. This is why a new model is needed, an evangelisation new in its ardour, new in its methods, new in its expression.

It is important to note that evangelisation is always a two-way movement: *ad intra* and *ad extra*, like breathing-in and breathing-out. Evangelisation is *ad intra*, Christians themselves being evangelised, growing and deepening in their faith, a life-long journey. Evangelisation is also *ad extra*, Christians reaching out to others to propose to them the Good News. It is also important to note that NE is not a programme. In his 2001 Apostolic Letter opening the millennium, JP2 said:

"we are ... 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 by the assurance he gives us: I am with you! It is not therefore a matter of inventing a 'new programme'".²⁷

So not a programme, but a Person. Evangelisation is about encounter, an event, personally entering into friendship with Jesus Christ and becoming His disciple. From this at the same time, it is about sharing Christ with others and attracting them to Him.

To speak this way for many is baffling. Catholics can usually do 'Church' but not 'Christ'. They can talk about their parish and school, their priest, the children making First Communion, but they cannot easily give a testimony, or speak about their faith, explain what they believe or speak of friendship with Christ. They know about Friday abstinence, the papacy or the Church's moral teachings on sex and abortion and they may well be able to recite prayers and novenas. But faith, spirituality, a personal love for God? Why Christ died? What it means to say Christ is risen? A personal relationship with Jesus Christ, Lord and Saviour: isn't that Protestant?

²⁶ See Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium. The Joy of the Gospel* (London, CTS: 2013)

²⁷ John Paul II *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 29, text available online at www.vatican.va (February 2020).

This challenge also applies to parishes and schools. Since Vatican II, great efforts have gone into developing new structures, building up the Church, creating parish communities, enabling lay ministries. Yet during this period, contemporary culture, not least the media, has become post-religious, even Christophobic and hostile. The clergy abuse crisis has added immeasurably to this negativity. As if for safety, many Catholics have retreated. Clergy now see themselves as ‘chaplains to the Catholic community’ and many faithful see themselves as ‘consumers of services provided.’ Some parishes have become inward-looking, like members’ clubs. Churches, once always open, are now locked. James Mallon in his book *Divine Renovation* develops many of these themes from his own parochial experience, including the Bingo Club that block-booked the parish centre, meaning it could never be used for newcomers.²⁸

The Church does not exist to create ‘community’ but ‘communion.’ The Church does not exist to create lay ministries, but lay mission.²⁹ The Church does not exist, as Pope Francis puts it, to be ‘self-referential’ – a spiritual disease, he says, that causes the Church to become sick and elderly³⁰ – but to go out onto the margins to serve the needy. In his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* he says:

“I dream of a ‘missionary option,’ that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.”³¹

The crisis the Church faces is not a crisis of institution but a crisis of faith. The Church needs to take seriously the new culture of secularism and atheism that has arisen. A key reason for the attrition of faith and collapse of practice in Catholic families, schools and parishes over the years since Vatican II has been a doe-eyed lack of awareness of culture. Catholics need to have the courage to be different, a distinctive community, countercultural. An evangelisation ‘new in its ardour, new in its methods, new in its expression’ might not mean doing a lot of new things but rather of doing things in a new way. It certainly implies a new passion for the faith, so that

²⁸ J. Mallon *Divine Renovation. Bringing your Parish from Maintenance to Mission* (New London, Twenty-Third Publications: 2014).

²⁹ The role of the laity in the Church’s mission is paramount. *Lumen Gentium* notes how it is the laity’s “special vocation . . . to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will. . . . There they are called by God that, being led by the spirit to the Gospel, they may contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. . . . It pertains to them in a special way so to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are so closely associated that these may be effected and grow according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer” (LG 31). This task is not for the clergy. Only the laity, because of their skills in the world, culture and everyday life, can do this. As the Vatican II Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam Actuositatem* puts it: “the effort to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which one lives, is so much the duty and responsibility of the laity that it can never be performed properly by others” (AA 13).

³⁰ In an interview in 2013 before his election to the See of Peter, Pope Francis said:

“There is a tension between the center and the periphery.... We must get out of ourselves and go toward the periphery. We must avoid the spiritual disease of the Church that can become self-referential: when this happens, the Church itself becomes sick. It’s true that accidents can happen when you go out into the street, as can happen to any man or woman. But if the Church remains closed onto itself, self-referential, it grows old. Between a Church that goes into the street and gets into an accident and a Church that is sick with self-referentiality, I have no doubts in preferring the first.”

See A. Stille ‘Pope Francis Against Rome’ *The New Yorker*, March 14, 2013; online at www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/pope-francis-against-rome (February 2020)

³¹ Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium* 27.

Catholics will naturally reach out to others. It means new ways of communicating the Gospel, the use of new media and new methods. It means too new expressions of faith, groups and communities for the 21C. This might seem challenging, yet the question of God, spirituality, the desire for happiness and love, for a sense of belonging and for immortality, is embedded and operative in every human heart, even if at times overlaid by the busyness and noise of life. The task of NE is to direct this innate desire towards the only Person Who can fulfil it: Jesus Christ.

3. Going Forward

So, to end with three practical proposals.

First, to deepen faith. Afront secularism, the most effective witness is for every Catholic to grow in faith, to become more holy, to be what they are meant to be, to be authentic, credible witnesses, ‘can-do’ disciples of Jesus Christ who put their faith into action, not least in service of the poor and needy. This means prayer, developing a more personal relationship with God and acquiring a deeper knowledge of the Faith.

Intellectually, this is about understanding Faith better through Bible study, spiritual reading, writings that deepen ardour and nourish mind and heart. A new apologetics is needed that can pinpoint the flaws of secularism, rebut popular myths about science, especially in Catholic schools, address the hot button issues relating to sex, authority and human dignity, underline the positive role of religion within human living and tackle the drift towards totalitarianism and restrictions on religious expression.

But opportunities for spiritual growth need to be developed too. As Sherry Weddell notes, a significant minority of Catholics convert to Evangelicalism; this is not because of Church teachings, the abuse-crisis or a marriage issue, but because they say their spiritual needs are not being met in the Catholic Church.³² Spiritual growth is about growing in love, prayer, devotion and developing a deeper personal-passionate friendship with Jesus. It is no longer enough simply to attend Sunday Mass. Everyone should belong to a faith-sharing group, a bible-study, alpha team or work of charity that meets regularly for prayer, formation, testimony and mutual support. The Year of the Word is a help; in Portsmouth, we have added in 2021 a Year of the Eucharist, two years of spiritual renewal. Another help is the *Called and Gifted Programme*, which involves one to one interviews with people about their relationship with God to help them discern the gifts and charisms God has given them for mission and service.³³

A second proposal: Eucharistic Adoration. At the heart of the Church is the presence of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. Every Catholic should find a church that is open, locate the Tabernacle and spend regular periods of prayer in Adoration. The Blessed Sacrament is not only a Sacred Object to be adored but a Sacred Subject to be loved,

³² Weddell *Forming Intentional Disciples* 29.

³³ For more on this, see <http://www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk/calledandgifted/> (February 2020)

Jesus Christ. In the monstrance, we meet Jesus Christ in Person. To build a real relationship with Him, there is no alternative to spending time with Him.

An ‘attitudinal’ shift is needed from an ecclesio-centric world-view (focused on the Church as an institution) to a Christo-centric view (focused on Christ, Lord and Saviour). Catholics need to become less absorbed with the Church, with churchy things, with church structures and more concerned with the Person of Christ, with discipleship. We are not here to preach the Church but Christ. Christocentricity is difficult for many older Catholics. NE means shifting focus from the Church of the Lord to the Lord of the Church, from concern with the Church’s internal life to her apostolate in the world, a move from maintenance to mission.

Moreover, catechesis and adult faith-formation needs to have a far greater concern with conversion, religion, prayer, experiencing God, with the purpose of fanning into a flame the natural desire for God in the human heart and directing it to the Person of Jesus Christ. Surely the time has come to put all the Church’s resources at the service of helping people to pray, to find God, to connect with Him, to commit to Him, to learn the art of praying, to develop a real relationship with Christ, to acquire a strong sense of what it means to be chosen by Him? Churches need to be kept open for prayer, to have leaflets on prayer, to run courses on how to pray. Catholics have huge resources for this, not least in the lives of the saints and in two millennia of spiritual theology. At the same time, rather than massing individuals into groups, much more energy needs to be put into personal accompaniment, spiritual direction, one-to-one guidance, to assist individuals advance in their discipleship.

A third proposal: service, works of charity, Christian action. Evangelisation must include service, charitable works, transformational action, as well as advocacy work for justice. As Pope Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

“Our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society’s most neglected members. .. Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society” (186-187).

Catholics should be at the forefront of serving the poor and needy, those on the margins, the concern for nature, the environment and climate-change. Every parish might ask: What does poverty mean in this place, in this community? What are the real needs here? Who are the poorest and how might they be helped? In this way, the Catholic community can demonstrate its faith by good works, contributing to the common good and offering practical help to those in need. After all, in St. Matthew’s account of the Last Judgement, Jesus identifies Himself with the poor such that in serving them we serve Him:

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me’ (Mt 25: 34-40).”

Many of the saints recognised instinctively this intrinsic link between mission and service. The Patron of our Portsmouth Youth, Bl. Pier Giorgio Frassati, as a teenager would receive Holy Communion on his way to school and in the evenings undertake voluntary work with the SVP in the slums of Turin. He once said,

“Jesus pays me a visit in Communion every morning, and I repay Him [in the evening], in the miserable way I can, by visiting His poor.”³⁴

Actions speak louder than words. To be serious about mission means to be serious about service. Many parishes and schools are inward-looking; an evangelising parish or school is outward-looking, focused on service, especially of the neediest and the poorest. In Portsmouth, an important development has been the establishment of *Caritas*, which is now inspiring, sponsoring and helping parishes, schools and individuals undertake local projects that make a difference, such as feeding the homeless, sponsoring refugee families, running a children’s project and so on.

Conclusion

So to conclude. Callum Brown, himself an atheist and humanist, points out how the secularisation and rise of atheism that has occurred over the last decades in Britain, and more generally in the West, has been an “overwhelmingly white affair.”³⁵ It has been led disproportionately by those from a liberal Protestant milieu and from liberal strands within Catholicism, thus bearing out St. John Henry Newman’s remark that liberalism is the half-way house between ‘the way to Rome’ and the ‘way to atheism’.³⁶ The role of liberalism in secularisation, however, is a further study.³⁷

In its two thousand year history, the Church has never before engaged directly with a secular culture. It is a huge challenge to navigate, and evangelisation can, at times, seem like flogging a dead horse. A direct consequence is that the Church is becoming much smaller. More positively, as Pope Benedict once put it, the Church in a de-Christianised Europe has to become a creative minority.³⁸ Like St. Paul, she must

³⁴ “Gesu mi fa visita con la Comunione ogni mattina ed io gliela restituisco nel modo misero che posso: visitando i suoi poveri” L. Frassati *Mio Fratello Pier Giorgio: La Carita* (Torino, Effata Editrice: 2013) 25; cf. Siccardi 153.

³⁵ C. Brown *Becoming Atheist* 158f.

³⁶ “As I have already said, there are but two alternatives, the way to Rome, and the way to Atheism: Anglicanism is the halfway house on the one side, and Liberalism is the halfway house on the other.” John Henry Newman *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London, Longmans, Green and Co.: 1988) 203-204

³⁷ St. John Henry Newman describes liberalism in religious matters as the view that “truth and falsehood in religion are but matters of opinion; that one doctrine is as good as another; that the Governor of the world does not intend that we should gain the truth; that there is no truth; that we are not more acceptable to God by believing this than by believing that; that no one is answerable for his opinions; that they are a matter of necessity or accident; that it is enough if we sincerely hold what we profess; that our merit lies in seeking, not in possessing; that it is a duty to follow what seems to us true, without a fear lest it should not be true; that it may be a gain to succeed, and can be no harm to fail; that we may take up and lay down opinions at pleasure; that belief belongs to the mere intellect, not to the heart also; that we may safely trust to ourselves in matters of Faith, and need no other guide”. See J. H. Newman *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London, Rivingtons: 1878) 357-358.

³⁸ See ed. Sandro Magister ‘Interview with Pope Benedict: De-Christianized Europe. Church as a ‘Creative Minority’ (February 2009) - <https://www.catholic.org/news/international/europe/story.php?id=34545> (February 2020)

continue to proclaim the Message, in season and out.³⁹ Britain in fact is a fertile mission-field. It can be hard-going, but it is rare to encounter direct hostility. There is no need for despondency.⁴⁰ Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14: 6) and at this very moment, the Holy Spirit is at work in people's hearts wooing them towards Him. It is my own conviction that it is not the 'product' that is defective but the ability of people within a busy, consumer culture to hear God's Voice and call. As Catholics, we have a powerful Message ever relevant. It is Good News, an invitation to every single person. Our task is to communicate Christ attractively so that all may find their way to Him and to that true, genuine, lasting human happiness and fulfilment for which they long.

Thank you for listening.

³⁹ 2 Tim 4: 2

⁴⁰ "If we look at today's world, we are struck by many negative factors that can lead to pessimism. But this feeling is unjustified: we have faith in God our Father and Lord, in his goodness and mercy. ... God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity, and we can already see its first signs" St. John Paul II *Redemptoris Missio* (London, CTS: 1990) 86 – also available online at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html (July 2018)