

The Future Church at Our Lady of Graces

It's no good pretending. There is little doubt that in our part of the world fewer people are coming to Sunday Mass. Many no longer feel they 'have to go', many find church unwelcoming, many find it boring, and many find it irrelevant to their own lives.

At our Lady of Graces, as far as I can make out, our parish community has been fairly stable in terms of numbers over the past few years. But that is in spite of regular baptisms every two weeks, a Sacramental Program for 7 – 8 year olds with over 100 children each year, and a steady but small number of new parishioners asking to be enrolled in the parish. Another thing I notice, as I guess you do, is that each weekend there are visitors at Mass whom I have never seen before, and, of course, they are all most welcome. But our overall numbers seem to stay much the same.

But will the future be different? The experts are saying it will be, and I think they are right. My generation of Catholics grew up in Catholic homes where we all went to Mass and accepted the Catholic Church as our church. Our motives for 'going to Mass' were a mixture – we felt obliged by the Church's law, it was a family custom, it was a social event, we believed in God and wanted to ask for help and express our thanks.

Today it is changing, as we know, and tomorrow it will be more different. People will 'practice the faith' because at some stage of their lives they have undergone a personal conversion experience. That is, they have come to experience more deeply the intimacy of their own personal and unique relationship to God. Practising the faith then becomes a way of responding to and deepening that experience, just like the apostles after their Pentecost experience.

What does all that say about how we as a parish should plan for the future? If we continue the same as before, we will be 'catering' for a community which is diminishing in size, and we will be neglecting vast numbers of Catholics that we never see. I want to say something about that next week. Fr Tom.

What should be the future for Our Lady of Graces?

The big question seems to be: what is this parish for? It sounds a funny sort of question, but I think it is worth asking. I can think of at least two possible answers. One is that the function of our parish is basically to provide services for our parishioners – Masses, baptisms, marriages, funerals, etc. The other possible answer is that our parish exists primarily, not for the sake of our own parishioners, but in order to facilitate the primary task of any follower of Jesus, namely, "to make disciples of all nations." According to Matthew's Gospel, that was the final commission Jesus gave to his followers before he left them to return to his Father in heaven. And he promised to be with them to help.

In other words, is our first concern as parish with ourselves, or is our first concern to carry out a mission to others given to all the followers of Jesus? Is our gaze inward or outward? When so many of us spend time trying to prepare Sunday Masses that will really encourage full, conscious and active participation by all the faithful, are we thinking only of fellow parishioners, or are we trying to provide a welcome for any visitors who may be coming to their first Sunday Mass for a long time?

All of us can help to make such visitors welcome. All of us can be constantly on the lookout to invite others to join us at Mass. Do we ourselves find that our parish Masses provide the kind of experience of the presence of God that enlivens us for the coming week? If not what can we do to remedy that? If you can bear it, I would like to continue this conversation next week, and I would be delighted to hear your thoughts. In the meantime, here's a story I thought worth passing on. Fr Tom.

A man attending a crowded church service refused to take his hat off when asked to do so by the ushers. The preacher was perturbed too, and after the service told the man that the church was quite happy to have him as guest, and invited him to join the church, but he explained the traditional decorum regarding men's hats and said, "I hope you will confirm to that practice in the future." "Thank you," said the man. "And thank you for taking time to talk to me. It was good of you to ask me to join the congregation. In fact, I joined it three years ago and have been coming regularly ever since, but today is the first day anyone ever paid attention to me. After being an unknown for three years, today, by simply keeping on my hat, I had the pleasure of talking to the ushers. And now I have a conversation with you, who have always appeared too busy to talk to me before!" –What do we do to make strangers welcome? Are we too busy?

Anonymous

Do we have something we are keen to share?

About 90% of Catholics are not regular Sunday Mass goers. In our parish that means about 9,000 people. I think we have to ask ourselves some possibly embarrassing questions. For example, does it matter to us that this many Catholics in our parish don't join us on Sundays? Are they missing anything important? Are we in any way responsible for them? Is there anything we can do to change this situation? I am afraid that our answer to all these questions should be "Yes."

I am not trying to give everyone the 'miseries', or make us all feel guilty. I think our reaction should be, yes, we do have something wonderful to share, and many people around us need what we have as much as we do. Part of our problem could be that we don't fully recognise how fortunate we are to have what we have, mainly the Mass. Sometimes we only come out of a sense of obligation ourselves. So we need to appreciate a bit more why our Mass is such a great gift from Jesus. And then we need to act as if we do realise that it is something wonderful, a real celebration. How do we do that? Good question, I think. Is it true that the churches with growing congregations are also the most enthusiastic and happiest? I think it is.

It is interesting that in St John's Gospel the Last Supper, which became our Mass, is described as a foot-washing exercise. Jesus washes his disciples' feet. St John is saying, that's what the Mass is about: a community of friends who come together to be served by Jesus and so become servants of others. Are such people the happiest among us? I suspect they are. Is Jesus' gift of the Eucharist a reason for celebration? I think it is.

"What then should we do?" Luke 3:10. Fr Tom

Who are these Catholics we don't often see on Sunday?

From what I see and hear, the majority of them are in their thirties and forties, they are very computer literate, occasionally they are aware that something is missing in their lives, if they are to come to church they will need to be members of small groups, not part of an anonymous crowd. For many of them the Church at present is just not relevant to their lives, it is uninteresting, God is irrelevant.

Does it make sense to say that these people are the ones we should be primarily thinking of as we plan our Sunday Masses and other events in our parish? Are we really meant to be like the Good Shepherd and go looking for the lost ones? If they did turn up would we speak to them and make them welcome? It has been suggested, wisely, I think, that if these fellow Catholics are to be attracted back to Sunday Mass with us, three factors are of primary importance – the music we use, the Christian message we hand on, and the ministers who lead our liturgies. We cannot and do not want to make them come. They have to be drawn by what is on offer in our church, and that applies

in a special way to the young people. We might say, we provide Masses every Sunday. They can take it or leave it. But when we read the Gospel we find a different attitude on the part of Jesus.

What is Evangelisation?

Pope Paul VI, whom Pope Francis recently made a 'Blessed', said in the 1960's that, "The Church exists in order to evangelise," to help people to believe how much God loves them. What Pope Francis is doing, among other things, is trying to help more of us see that evangelisation is for all Catholics, not just priests and religious sisters and brothers.

There must be millions of lay Catholics around the world who are evangelising in a vast variety of ways, being people closer to God and his Church. I am sure many do not realise that they are evangelising. They think there are just helping people. But Pope Francis wants us to let people know why we are helping them. It is all because of Jesus.

What would it mean for our parish to be more involved in evangelisation? It is all about continuing what Jesus was doing when he was visibly among us – healing people, feeding them, telling them stories about his Father, forgiving them, celebrating with them, and sometimes accusing them. I think of what is already being done by our parish St. Vincent de Paul group who care for the needy, our Legion of Mary group who visit people in their homes, and all the other parishioners who anonymously imitate Jesus in their way of life. But I am also thinking of the 90% of Catholics who seldom join us for Mass on Sundays. What is God asking us as a parish to do for them?

Priorities for Our Lady of Graces?

Do you think I'm right in suggesting that as a parish we ought to be more concerned about those Catholics we don't often or ever see on Sundays. And that if they are to join us it will have to be because we have something to offer which they find attractive. The Mass is what we have. How do we make it more attractive? Well, it will be attractive if we do what the Church is asking us to do.

Firstly, so I am told, we have to provide music that draws people in, that makes them feel they want to join in, that gives expression to their actual relationship with God, that makes them feel they are at one with the community around them. Secondly, the message they take away with them, from the homily, the readings, the atmosphere of the celebration of the Eucharist, has to be experienced as empowering them to live their lives confidently in the presence of God. Finally, the impact of all the ministers involved in the celebration of Mass – welcomers, servers, readers, Eucharistic ministers, gift bringers, collectors – has got to be that of people who know what they are doing and value and enjoy their ministry.

My thinking and listening and reading tells me that if people join our parish they will be wanting to feel part of a community. That can be difficult in a parish of seven or eight hundred people. So I think we have to find ways of creating smaller communities within our parish. Other parishes have done it. Some of us have experienced it.

These are my thoughts at the end of this year. If you agree with at least some of them, will you do even more to help put them into practice in 2015? Fr Tom