

# ENCOURAGEMENT

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## *Empty Pews?*

There are of course many reasons why there has been a serious fall-out from the church, accelerated in recent years. Who can fail to notice the increasing empty pews, more especially outside the urban areas but in those too. The prevailing culture of our times with both the materialism and self-perpetuation, self-promoting emphasis on ‘wants’ are obvious but there are many other reasons, which seem to be ignored and almost shunned as perspectives. While the latter is self-evident should we close our eyes and ears to the fact that others are attracting vast numbers of people (including Catholics) especially the young, who are eager for ‘a belief in something’.

I started University at the end of the Vatican Council, a ‘baby boomer’, and the number in the chaplaincy swelled and it was thriving. Having followed the teaching of the Council at school and well instructed, I was further delighted to receive ongoing information from those who attended the council or contributed to it. I never considered it as a threat or something to be shunned. Indeed, it was a source of encouragement to commit fully to participation in church activities post-graduation.

However, over the years I have witnessed the many ways the Council has been used as reason and excuse for the departure of so many. I have lived through and observed the reasons given for the dissatisfaction with the church and not necessarily a loss of faith. I therefore would like to offer a few suggestions and perspectives for why this might be happening.

Firstly, the speedy introduction of changes divided the membership with labels such as ‘traditionalist’ or ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative, right wing’ or ‘modern and left’ This surely is not the language of Faith, and it caused wounds and divisions which have not been healed and reconciled. Further as they linger, they set a groundwork for catechesis which pervades and affects both Priests and people alike. There are also the effects of the changes which were not fully

explained affecting both Priests and people alike. There are also the consequences of the changes which were not made clear and are still a source of both confusion and misunderstanding for many. Over the years now, sixty-five, (end of Vat. Council) the effects of these divisions have got into the nooks and crannies of all aspects of church life and still make dialogue difficult as comments and questions are judged by the labels attached to the speakers. Those who try to reject the labels often find themselves alienated and treated as outsiders.

Then of course the culture was changing but many issues were ignored or not dealt with directly leading to an opinion-based evaluation and justified as such. Issues such as marriage, divorce, same gender relationships and transgender issues were swept under the carpet. Mass communication, uses of media, anti-Christian perspectives, changes in law, outlook, sometimes led by groups who sought to undermine a Christian ethos, grew in adherence often under the label of ‘tolerance’ and compassion, often false, which in the event were neither, in the true Gospel meaning of the words. Apprehension at being thought of as an outsider or not going with the times served only to fuel the fires of greater fear.

Then we have the ‘abuse’ crisis. The distrust this engendered is still with us and distrust and anger, feelings of loss and pain made community difficult.

Not least too, was a poor instruction of children and adults a major part for the lack of involvement. Notably here was scriptural ignorance, which indeed the Council tried to rectify,

Anyone who doubts this should listen to the voices of children undergoing catechetical instruction. Their cries are still unheard while ‘programmes’ are thrown at them while their homes have already abandoned church attendance and so they have little support, but their hearts are still receptive and this we underestimate greatly.

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**If you don't live what you believe, you will end by believing what you live. *Ven Archbishop Fulton Sheen***

Giving easy teaching which is neither helpful nor challenging cannot be useful or beneficial.

We have also long abandoned the kind of 'devotional life' that brought people together, often for service. Yes, I almost hear the 'sniggers' at the uses of the word and yet these associations gave a depth to affiliation. There are many new such associations which broadly are not encouraged or promoted. We have become mainly a Church of Vigil or Sunday Mass goers and worsening daily attendance with few other times for prayer and worship. Yet where these have been tried there has been a good response.

While we appreciate the challenge of a shortage of priests, what has happened to 'Universality' of the Church? We saw nothing wrong with sending out missionaries all over the world? Are we too proud to accept help back from places that have surplus? Or indeed think of many other solutions to that shortage... We must also remember that the church in countries outside Europe are thriving despite persecution in many cases.

We have also lost the art of encouragement and are almost too afraid, or ashamed to own the fact that we still 'Believe'. There is a reluctance to invite people to return because it is not seen as either necessary or important – after all they are all 'good people'. Indeed the growing secularisation and need for social acceptance has thwarted our desire for gentle evangelisation and guidance as 'gift.' What ever happened to the Spiritual Works of Mercy? There is a fear in families to bring up the issue for fear of disagreements and hostility. Grandparents today try to fulfil this role in the early years of their grandchildren, but 'back off' as things become difficult in teenage years. It is one of the very sad aspects of family life for many, that the faith that brought them together is the means of separation and anxiety.

Employment and work issues, especially Sunday work, do affect many and less tolerance of religious reasons for absenteeism force many to abandon attendance. It is a reason given by some to justify a lack of general interest. We have not engaged in dialogue and do not listen to the voices of those who

have left and who for a variety of reasons struggle to be members and re-membered.

We also have an opportunity and also must make a commitment to encourage young people providing them with a platform of hope and honesty. Many are searching, and indeed for more traditional teaching, as it provided a consistency and stability which many are seeking. Genuine care is more that gesture of token participation.

We must remember that first and foremost we are both Christians and witnesses. Unless we remember that Joy is our calling and that a life of holiness is a central call and do not let all other things distract us, our pews will continue to empty. Equally as baby boomers exit the church for a life in the next world and the numbers of under sixties continues to decline the laity will vanish. While we make excuses a passionate reappraisal is required and not palliatives and apologies but faith hope and charity.

*Halina Holman©*



**Pope Leo XIV** *"We have no need of powerful patrons, worldly compromises, or emotional strategies. Evangelization is always God's work. If at times it takes place through us, it is thanks to the bonds that it makes possible. The Church needs neither an exchange of favours with the world nor marketing strategies based on emotions or excessive protagonism. Evangelization is God at work."* (2026)

### **Feast days in July**

**1<sup>st</sup> St. Oliver Plunkett**

**3<sup>rd</sup> St. Thomas, Apostle**

**4<sup>th</sup> St. Elizabeth of Portugal**

**5<sup>th</sup> Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**6<sup>th</sup> St. Maria Goretti**

**9<sup>th</sup> St. Augustine Zhao Rong & Comp.**

**11<sup>th</sup> St. Benedict, Patron of Europe**

**12<sup>th</sup> Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**15<sup>th</sup> St. Bonaventure**

**16<sup>th</sup> Our Lady of Mount Carmel**

**19<sup>th</sup> Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**21<sup>st</sup> St. Lawrence of Brindisi**

**22<sup>nd</sup> St. Mary Magdalene**

**23<sup>rd</sup> St. Bridget of Sweden, Patron of Europe**

**24<sup>th</sup> The Martyrs of the Diocese (Hexham & Newcastle UK)**

**25<sup>th</sup> St. James, Apostle**

**26<sup>th</sup> Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time**

**29<sup>th</sup> Sts. Martha, Mary & Lazarus 30<sup>th</sup> St. Peter Chrysologus**

**31<sup>st</sup> St. Ignatius of Loyola**