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“ How to save the English Church

by **Stephen Bullivant** posted Thursday, 4 Jan 2018



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The solution is staring the bishops in the face

Let's begin with some truths universally acknowledged about the Catholic Church in Britain (and many places elsewhere too). We have fewer priests now than we used to. The average age of the ones we do have is higher than it once was. There are more priestly retirements (or deaths) each year than ordinations. A number of our seminaries have closed, and the ones we still have are not all bursting at the seams.

Typically, these unobjectionable facts are summarised by the familiar phrase “shortage of priests”. But is this really the problem?

Consider some simple numbers, drawn from two main sources: the Catholic Directory and

Religious Trends (both most safely regarded as “impressionistic”, but they’ll do the job here well enough). In 1970, England and Wales had roughly 7,700 active priests (including Religious), and 1.9 million worshippers on a typical Sunday. By 2014, we had around 4,900 active priests, and 850,000 Sunday worshippers. So although priest numbers fell between 1970 and 2014 by 48 per cent, Sunday worshippers fell by 55 per cent.

Let us put these numbers another way. In 1970, for every 10,000 Sunday Mass-goers, there were 40 priests to serve them. But by 2014, the same number had 46 priests. In fact, Catholics in 2014 had a better priests-to-practisers ratio than at any time between 1950 (and no doubt long before) and the 1990s.

This is, of course, a pyrrhic pastoral victory: we’ve lost practising Catholics even faster than we have priests. It would be wonderful to have more priests, but it would be even more wonderful to have more practising Catholics. (Frankly, I suspect that if we solve the latter problem, the former will largely solve itself.)

But in light of the numbers of practising Catholics we do have, then, seen objectively, it is hard to see how we have too few priests to care for them all. But of course that is not how the Church sees the problem – and with good reason.

For we do not, of course, allot a set number of worshippers to the care of a priest directly. Instead, this allotting is typically, and for good reasons, done via the medium of parishes. Priests are assigned a parish (or several) by their bishop, and practising Catholics are assigned one by where they happen to live. The parish is, if you like, the organising unit of pastoral life.

The trouble is that the number, shape and size of our parishes were determined with many more priests and worshippers in mind. Thus in 1970 there were 3,600 churches open to the public, of which 2,400 were parish churches. In 2014, there were 2,800, with roughly the same number being parish churches. So overall church numbers have fallen by only around 22 per cent: far, far slower than either priests or practisers. And parish churches specifically, a far more telling measure, have fallen not at all.

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What does all this mean? That we’re thinning out fewer priests, and proportionally even fewer worshippers, over a parish infrastructure intended to work with rather more of both.

This is damaging for several reasons. It is now very common for a single priest to have care of two (or more) parishes. The number of practising Catholics in his care may well be more or less the same as, in previous decades, the parish priest in just one of those parishes would have had.

But of course, since these worshippers are divided between two parishes, the priest has vastly more work. Two sets of parish accounts to deal with. Two schools’ governing bodies to chair. Two sets of choirs, altar servers and catechetical teams to oversee. He must divide Saturday evening and Sunday morning between two churches (perhaps saying four Masses to a combined congregation which could fit, quite comfortably, into three or even two Masses if all in one parish).

In my wife’s Lancastrian village, I once attended an Easter Vigil that began at 4.30pm in broad daylight. Liturgically crazy, but practically understandable given that our priest had to do the same thing at his other church later on.

It is by no means ideal for parishioners either. That is most obviously so for those in a priest’s

“other” parish, away from where he actually lives. But beyond that, for both sets of congregations there is a psychological effect of never being in a full church. It is also, of course, that much harder to put together a decent choir, or music group, or cater for a parish event, or all manner of other things that contribute to parish community life.

The simple fact is that we have far too many parishes – or, more to the point, far too many churches (since the common solution of combining two parishes into one, but retaining both churches, doesn’t actually help much with the issues I’ve described). That is not so much the elephant in the room as the mammoth in the chancery.

Of course, no bishop wants to close churches, and with good reason. It is deeply upsetting and unpopular for priests and laity alike. The renovation of churches into Tesco Metros sends an awfully depressing signal. Combining worshipping communities is difficult. There will always be a proportion of people for whom this change to the status quo simply means they stop going to Mass altogether.

These are often buildings – in some cases, beautiful buildings – where generations of Catholics have worshipped and been baptised, married and buried.

These are not things to lose lightly. Once churches are sold, moreover, it is unlikely, even in much better times to come, that we will be ever be able to buy them back. So it is no surprise that churches are closed only as a matter of last resort.

Without denying that church closures are often inevitable, they are not always the only solution to too many churches. Indeed, several dioceses in north-west England are quietly pioneering another model, of which other “church rich, but priest-and-parishioner poor” bishops might well take heed.

The basic model is simple: lift a surplus-to-requirements church out of the normal parish system and give it to a niche group that can do something distinctive with it. Some of the original parishioners will stay and adjust (and be quite happy to do so); others will go off to provide a welcome boost to the numbers of nearby parishes. By allowing this group to spread its wings, and do something distinctive, it can then attract like-minded people from the surrounding area. Perhaps in any one parish there might be only two, or three, or five people for whom this is “their thing”, but over a wide area – especially in a large town or city – those few soon add up.

After all, most people already drive to church and a significant number of Mass-goers frequent a church that is not, strictly speaking, their own. This happens most obviously in places like London (how many of those attending the Oratory do you suppose actually live within its parochial boundaries?). But it is a perfectly common practice throughout the whole country.

Take my own home town of Preston, in the Diocese of Lancaster. Three grand old churches have recently been given over to the traditionalist Institute for Christ the King (St Walburge’s and English Martyrs) and the Syro-Malabar Church (St Ignatius, or rather the Cathedral of St Alphonsa as it is now). While these three are only a mile apart, there are more than a dozen other Catholic churches within a three-mile radius. So there’s no shortage of options for these churches’ original worshippers, looking for what they’re liturgically used to. I have visited St Walburge’s on a number of occasions, and it is genuinely thriving. In fact, they’re now setting up a school. I’ve also been to the Archdiocese of Liverpool’s own experiment in this area: St Mary’s, Warrington, entrusted to another traditionalist order, the FSSP. It too is doing just champion, as we say in Lancashire.

This basic model is, I’ll wager, worth exploring further, and with other groups. If it can work in

Preston with both Extraordinary Form (EF) devotees and Keralan-diaspora Syro-Malabars, with whom else might it work? (As a curious side note, while I've seen the idea of EF communities criticised for being cliquey and divisive, I've never heard the same allegations against dedicated churches for Eastern Catholic groups.)

I've no doubt that there are several new movements who, with their particular charisms, could make a good go of saving a church from Tesco Metrodom. More formal provision for certain national groups might also make sense in certain places: why not a Filipino church to add to central London's French, Irish, Polish and German ones, for example?

That said, if I were a bishop, cautiously willing to give the idea a go, what I'd really be praying for is a group with dozens of young and energetic clergy, thoroughly immersed in British culture, and with years (if not decades) of pastoral experience, as well as – why not, since we're praying to Him for whom all things are possible? – already proving themselves to be excellent priests within my own diocese. Which brings us to the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham.

Given the kinds of statistics I've outlined – that is, too many churches for the numbers of priests and worshippers we actually have – it's no wonder that many bishops have readily borrowed ordinariate priests for their dioceses.

Anglicanorum Coetibus was, in this sense, a unexpected windfall of additional clergy. There are, I believe, currently 60 ordinariate priests on loan to the English and Welsh dioceses, with most of these assigned to parishes.

I recognise, of course, the benefits and expediency of such arrangements. As it happens, I have been glad of “borrowed” ordinariate priests in two dioceses I've lived in. Bishops need priests, and priests – and their families – need stipends. Nevertheless, I don't think the current model of plugging gaps in ordinary diocesan provision is, in the long run, a sensible one for either party.

From my outsider's view – I'm neither a member, nor eligible to become one – the ordinariate offers the Church in England and Wales (Scotland too!) a significant pastoral opportunity: the possibility of a permanent structure, fully part of the wider Catholic community, but with its own distinctive liturgy, spirituality, musical traditions, parish culture and atmosphere. Rather than being simply a one-off fix to bring a wave of former Anglicans into full communion with Rome, it is genuinely sustainable. It is continuing to attract former Anglicans and others (not excluding other Catholics) on its own terms, while at the same time being a community in which children are brought up, who in turn bring up their own children in it.

Christ's Church has plenty of room in it for such a body, as is again amply proven by the Eastern Catholic churches. Such a thing will not, of course, appeal to everyone (including not all former Anglicans). But then why should it? This vision, of course, fits perfectly with the “Preston Option” I've been describing, with the ordinariate offering a niche way of “being Church” that complements, rather than competes with, the default normal parish offering.

I've even seen it work – in Texas, of all places. Last year I stood at the back of a packed vigil Mass at Houston's ordinariate Cathedral of Our Lady of Walsingham. The next day there would be four further Masses, all using the Divine Worship missal and all similarly well attended. Around a third of those present, I was told, were former Episcopalians and their families, a third were cradle Catholics of various types and a third were converts from other Christian denominations, other religions, or no religion at all. It had, admittedly, taken the congregation a long time to get to this point: 30 years, in fact. But in all seriousness, if such a thing is possible in Houston, then one might suppose there's a fair chance of replicating it a little nearer to Walsingham itself.

From where I'm kneeling, we seem to have a God-given cure to many a diocesan bishop's headache. So why are our dioceses not queuing up for the ordinariate to take otherwise under-threat churches off their hands, and on extremely advantageous terms? This is a genuine question, for I am genuinely puzzled.

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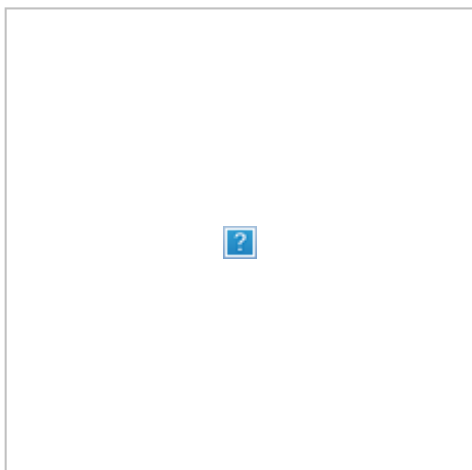


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