

PARISH PRACTICE

Building the faith

KEITH BARLTROP

The beauty of our churches has great potential for attracting people to Christianity, if we are prepared to be imaginative

DAVID, A MIDDLE-AGED convert from London, was recently talking to me about his "path to Rome". Attracted to the Catholic Church in his youth but still unsure about joining, he walked into Westminster Cathedral one day during his lunch break. The choir were practising, incense was hanging in the air from a recent ceremony, and the sheer holiness of the place, he said, was almost tangible. Then it was as if he heard an inner voice: "If you enter the Catholic Church, somewhere there will be a place for you." It seemed to be pointing to the cathedral, with its many side chapels, as a symbol of the Catholic Church itself, not the monolithic structure it is sometimes portrayed as, but a wide and welcoming place with many rooms for many kinds of people. That experience finally convinced him to take the step he had been struggling to make.

This story illustrates dramatically the potential church buildings have for evangelisation, one of the avenues currently being explored by CASE – the Catholic Agency to Support Evangelisation – in its drive to help Catholics respond to Pope John Paul's call for a "new evangelisation". Significantly, the story took place about 40 years ago, at a time when "evangelisation" would have been understood by Catholics primarily as a silent witness of life which rendered words unnecessary. Christian values still formed a sub-stratum in society then, which made such silent witness intelligible. It's as if Westminster Cathedral itself shared in that silent witness to David: it didn't need placards up explaining the meaning of "holiness" or "the presence of God".

How much has changed in 40 years. To quote Cardinal Ratzinger: "A progressive process of de-Christianisation and a loss of the essential human values... [means that] a large part of today's humanity does not find the Gospel in the permanent evangelisation of the Church: That is to say, the convincing response to the question: How to live?" In other words, the new evangelisation is a call to Catholics to wake up to the changed cultural climate of today, the "death of Christian Britain", as one writer has called it. In this climate we need a more explicit witness to our faith and creative new ways of sharing it. One of these ways is through our buildings.

On a recent visit to North Wales, I was conducted as part of a group round the beautiful Franciscan monastery complex of Pantasaph, where one of the brothers has given formation in evangelisation to some lay leaders. When we were taken round the church, in addition to the usual historical and artistic explanations, the guide told us as we approached the Blessed Sacrament what a difference it made to her to spend time in front of Our Lord each day. It was a perfect example of a Catholic "new evangelisation" style, gentle and very natural, yet explicit – and also of the use of the building itself as a more-than-silent witness.

I saw a quite different, but equally effective, style earlier this year on a visit to the famous Church of the Holy Name in Manchester. The traditional style of worship in this church might seem an uneasy partner for the new evangelisation; yet there, too attractive and highly readable cards placed discreetly in front of several items in the church, such as statues, pictures and the font, showed an awareness that the potential our buildings have for evangelisation needs to be unlocked through creative experiment.

One of the advantages of this approach for Catholics in Britain is its great ecumenical potential: one need only think of the example of many Anglican cathedrals and other buildings that try hard to be visitor-friendly. As always, Catholics will need help in feeling their way to a distinctively Catholic way of doing all this, adapted to our own sensibilities and a very different position in society from the established Church.

In continental Europe, some ways of doing this have been highlighted by the International Congresses on the New Evangelisation which are being led in five capital cities by their respective cardinals. These congresses are being facilitated by the Emmanuel Community, a French community of charismatic origin which has houses in many countries of the world and specialises in evangelisation through the use of art and music. They also lead parish missions based on city-centre churches, and I took part in one of these in Vienna last year.

Inside the church, Taizé-style music was playing, sympathetic confessors or listeners were posted discreetly around, and most importantly, the Blessed Sacrament was exposed. Outside was a group of artists drawing icons, musicians, and others talking to passers-by and inviting them in to spend "five minutes with God". Those who accepted the invitation were invited to write a prayer and take it up to the Blessed Sacrament, or draw a "lucky-dip" Bible verse.

Relatively few parishes could attempt such a mission, dependent as it is on the location of the church, but CASE took part in an experiment this summer which has very wide potential. The parish of Glastonbury decided to mount an outreach to the annual rock festival, based in the parish church, and invited groups including the lay community of Worth Abbey, Youth 2000, the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal and CASE to help.

The two main prongs of the mission were to make the church itself as attractive and intelligible as possible to casual visitors, and to evangelise through friendly dialogue with people on the streets. We helped the parish team to plan the event, and collaborated in producing resources such as a welcome sheet for visitors to the church and cards to hand out on the street. A great deal of emphasis was laid on trying to make a visit to the church an "experience" appealing to all the senses – sight, smell, sound, hearing and taste, with free tea and coffee made available outside the entrance.

Of course, it is impossible to measure the effectiveness of such an event, but it is surely something that others can learn from. Almost every area has a local festival, concert or other event which could be a springboard for evangelisation. And while some churches are tucked away up side streets, a considerable number are on main roads, city centres or tourist areas where with a little imagination they could become powerful means of promoting a renewed evangelisation.

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