

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners,

A fortnight ago the Archbishop of Dublin celebrated Mass in one of Dublin's largest churches. It was to be the last Mass in the building. The church had been constructed to the west of the city in a new suburban development which, in the late 1950's when it was opened by the late Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, was full of young families. The church had six Sunday Masses, all attended to overflowing, and there were large parish schools where the children received their primary education. All that is now over. There are plans to construct a much more modest church on the grounds of the larger one which is soon to be knocked down. Archbishop Diarmuid Martin celebrated this Mass, which brought closure to half a century of vibrant Catholic life in the Dublin suburb where it was situated, in the same week when his diocesan seminary, Clonliffe College, and all its adjoining buildings were sold - and thus no longer of use to the Church - to the Gaelic Athletic Association. This autumn saw five seminarians entering St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Ireland's only major seminary, to train for the priesthood in a country which has twenty six dioceses.

At the end of September I celebrated the main Sunday Mass in the church of St. Lawrence, Kilmacud, the church was less than half full and most of the congregation was either elderly or made up of immigrants to Ireland. One could go on and the story would not be a cheerful one, alas. The Mass count here in Our Lady & St. Anne was held over four of the last five Sundays and it is good to see that the Mass attendance numbers have edged up ever so slightly. That is good news but, just as the news from Ireland should certainly not induce despond, neither should our encouraging statistics make us complacent. Even the shortest visit to Ireland impresses on one how the Faith is still very much alive, the culture is deeply impregnated with Christian tradition and an ethic which owes much to the teaching of the Catholic Church. It is just that the institution and the corporate identity of the Church holds little sway with the population as a whole and with the young in particular.

In Ireland there is no lack of sociological articles and longer analyses on why so many have abandoned religious practice, but here too we need to consider what it is about the English Catholic experience that continues to draw people to sabbath day observance and attendance at Sunday Mass. I have some ideas of my own as to why our numbers have remained steady but it would be good to hear what other members of our Sunday congregations think. It is important for us to ask ourselves why it is we do certain things that seem like responses to an inner automatic pilot. It is not even a question of finding new answers but perhaps of re-appropriating the old ones and making of an experience we take so much for granted something more life-enhancing and meaningful.

Father Patrick