

# 'We are the Church'

## Report on the survey conducted in the Sacred Heart Parish in Waterford

by Fergus Hogan

*As a child I went to Mass with my mother and Father and two brothers every Sunday. We were correct in our behaviour, and followed the rules. We stood and sat and spoke in response at all of the right times. As a very young boy I always loved the lines at the very end of the Mass when the Priest said: 'Go in peace, the Mass is ended.' I always felt that my response of 'Thanks be to God' rang out louder than everyone else's. It was time to go back out into the real world and do things, to run and laugh and play.*

*I also liked to think about what I had heard in the readings and the sermon at Mass. I loved the readings that were full of magic: like turning water into wine (I always trusted that God could work miracles). Or the reading where Jesus fed so many hungry people from so little food (this, I felt was really important work for the church in a world full of hungry people). But the one reading I could never understand was the one where Jesus went into the temple and wrecked his Father's home. Even as an adult who still goes to Mass from time to time, I have still wondered about the meaning in that story?*

Fergus Hogan

### An Era of Post-Institutional Religion?

Reading the findings from the Survey recently undertaken by the Sacred Heart Parish which explores parishioners' views on their church at the beginning of the 21st century has begun to help me to reconsider the possible meanings of this story in today's Ireland. Some commentators have begun to talk about modern Ireland as being a 'post' Catholic society; however, closer to the truth might be, that we have entered into a phase of post institutional religion. National statistics indicate that at present only 44% of people who regard themselves as Catholics attend Mass on a weekly basis, a finding that has been used to suggest that the numbers of 'practising' Catholics are in sharp decline. However, if we consider the tearing down of the institutional walls as an opportunity for change, renewal and growth we might also begin to consider that in a modern world people are choosing to practise their religion in ways other than (only) attending Mass regularly. Or as Fr. Dougal famously said, 'there are many ways of praying Ted!'

Like all institutions, the Catholic Church in Ireland is being affected by a social shift that has occurred in how people are interpreting, reflecting and living their lives. People are actively choosing, buying into or opting out of services – including church services – that do not satisfy their own personal desires. Rather than worry about 'falling' church numbers as something that is a current crisis we might reflect on how social changes are affecting people's lives, where, in general, we are living more individual and isolated lives rather than in community. In many ways it could be seen as a huge success that the Church still attracts so many people of various ages and backgrounds to come together to share in Eucharist.

### Response to Survey is Very Encouraging

Building on this strength the priests of the Sacred Heart Parish have begun to

reflect with the people at church on what it means to be a 'practising' Catholic. Engaging this research itself shows some very positive aspects of the state of the Church we are in. Firstly, the fact that this survey was initiated shows a level of courage at the heart of the parish and the courage to question what the 'institution' might be doing 'wrong.' Secondly, the fact that so many of the people at church responded, shows their commitment to the life of the Church. And thirdly, the way in which a team of people committed to their Church has worked on this project shows how people are still giving in all sorts of ways, of their talents and time to the Church.

### The Results of the Survey

The results give us some wonderful insights into 'Our Church', and how we want to practise our faith. The survey was filled out by 1215 churchgoers, of all ages and backgrounds. There were 167 (14%) younger than eighteen years of age. 176 (15%) between 18 and 35 years of age. 490 (40%) between 36 and 60 years of age and 382 (31%) over 60 years of age, a finding in itself that clearly shows the demographic profile of most churches, with far more 'older' people and very few younger regular churchgoers. Some of the findings show an interesting difference between the younger respondents and the older ones, while in some ways the responses are similar.

#### Question 2

**Which of the following areas are you pleased about in our church/parish?**

Church/Parish		
Atmosphere	944	77.70%
Liturgies	400	32.92%
Music	863	71.03%
Sermons	456	37.53%
Other Answers	114	9.38%
No Opinion	33	2.72%
One Answer only	269	22.14%
More than one answer	913	75.14%

## Good News

The good news is that those who regularly attend Mass, like the church, the priests and the way the community prays together. 80% of people said they liked the 'atmosphere' in the parish and church, and this figure was relatively constant across all ages. In particular, all ages like the way music is such a part of the liturgy (73%). While many mentioned the 'little things' that are done about the church as making a big difference: 'the way the priests meet people after Mass,' and how 'children are included in Mass and blessed at Communion.'

## Differences in Response

The key difference in responses according to age showed up when people were asked to say what they

would like from the parish? There was a very high response rate to this question (9 in ever 10 people had a suggestion). Looking at the results it seems that in general the older respondents asked for a spiritual need to be met. They asked for 'spiritual education' and 'organised retreats.' The younger churchgoers asked that their parish could twin with and sponsor a parish in the third world. This age difference quite interestingly mirrors what Fr. Richard Rohr calls the

'developmental spiritual life path' we follow, where in the younger part of our life we make promises to others and live out a fiery commitment to social justice and radical politics. Hence it is not surprising that 73% of those under 18 years said what they wanted their parish to do was to 'sponsor a parish in the third world.' According to Fr. Rohr the second part of our adult life (a time he equates to Christ's age when he died on the cross) we begin to make promises to ourselves in the search for the spiritual meaning in our life.

At a time when it feels to many that the Church they once knew, trusted and loved is being wrecked, the findings from this survey might work to remind us that in some languages, crisis also means opportunity. That from time to time we may as a Church need to pull down the 'institution' – in order to recreate a Church and faith and love that comes from the people

within? To this degree the findings from the survey shine a very useful light on the current state of the church we are in. Overall the findings can be read in a very positive and enlightening manner. The survey indicates that those of us in the church who attend Mass regularly like the parish and the church, the priests and the type of 'active' participation that occurs through music and church based activities. The key suggestion is for shorter sermons that are more 'socially concerned' and an approach by the institution of the Church that recognises the different 'spiritual development stages' of younger and older churchgoers.

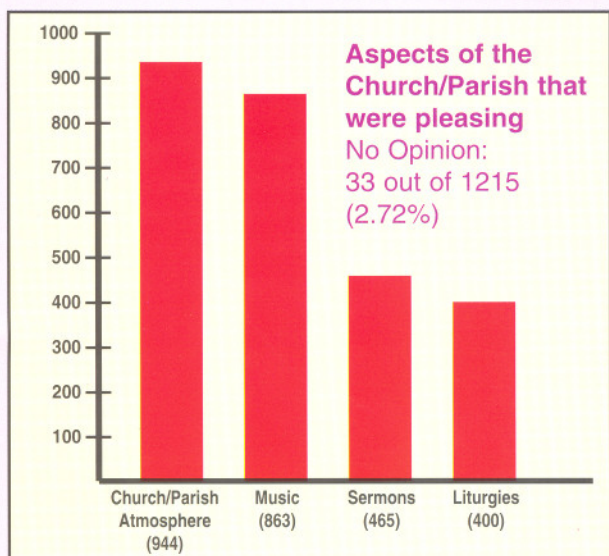
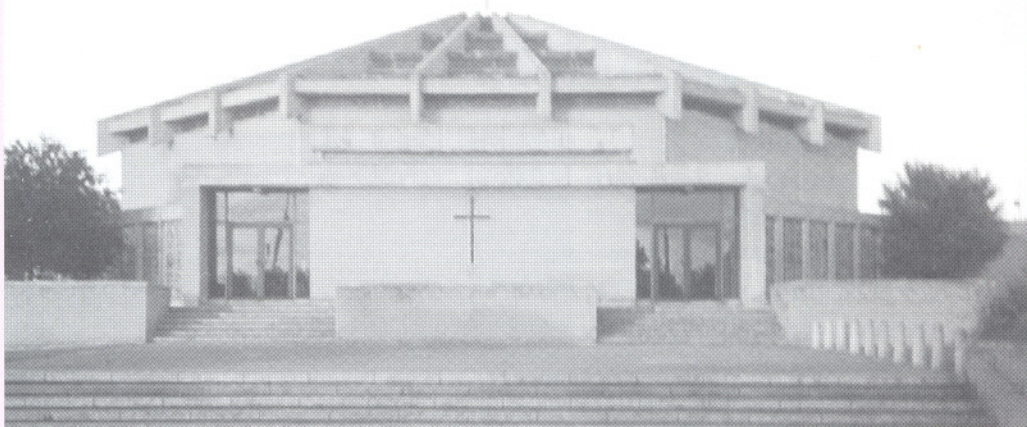
What is clear from this courageous piece of research is that while people are practising their religion in new ways, they see themselves as being the Church. Younger churchgoers want their church to do something for the world in terms of social justice and the third world – strong evidence if any were needed that the values and energy of the radical gospel are alive and well. The older churchgoers are searching for a space for spiritual reflection.

The Church, while changing, still holds true to social justice and spirituality. It is alive and well, and also found outside of the old walls of the institution - within the hearts of the people.

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## Sermons!

However only 40% say they like the sermons – the finding seems to be that A) the sermons could be shorter and B) they should address more 'up to date social and day to day' issues like alcohol and drug abuse were cited as being important by all age groups. The 'older' age group between 36 and 60 years asked for sermons in relation to marriage and separation as well as sin and mortal sin. When asked about why others have left the Church or how we as Church might attract them back, 10% of respondents thought "shorter sermons" were the key! The whole 'commodification' of life is impacting on the institution of the Church. People want shorter sermons - that fit with the reality of their daily lives – and help them to better understand their own personal and relationship struggles.