

A leading theologian and sociologist believes that, when the dust has settled on the pandemic, dioceses in England and Wales that had been planning for a future with fewer priests and fewer laypeople are likely to find the shrinking in Mass attendance to have been accelerated / **By STEPHEN BULLIVANT**

After the storm

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PREPARATIONS ARE being made by the bishops' conferences of Ireland, Scotland, and England and Wales to safely reopen churches for public Masses and for private prayer. I am not alone in wondering what Mass attendance figures might look like when all this is over.

I'm a sociologist and theologian with an interest in evangelisation. In *Catholicism in the Time of Coronavirus*, an ebook now available free from Word on Fire Institute (<https://www.wordonfire.org/covid/>) I look at the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the Church, especially in the United States, and how the Church's pastoral and evangelistic mission might most effectively respond. It is of and for a particular moment very aptly likened – as Pope Francis did in his extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* blessing on 27 March – to a storm at sea.

HERE I WANT to put on my sociologist hat and look at the likely impact of the crisis on Mass attendance in the United Kingdom. I lay out a mix of facts, reasonable theory, and informed-but-fallible speculation. A good deal of my analysis is not exactly cheering reading, though in my ebook I highlight some “silver lining” counter-trends. I have written in the past about the need for those committed to the new evangelisation to be clear sighted and realistic. There is no one, believe me, who would be happier to see me proven wrong.

First, some background. Mass attendance is already somewhat fluid. It fluctuates, sometimes quite dramatically, from week to week (as you've probably noticed from your ability to find a space in the church car park). Those

surface ripples, however, average themselves out. One month each year – October is traditionally regarded as the most “normal” for these purposes, though this may differ from place to place – dioceses ask their parishes to count up who's there at all the “Sunday” Masses (including vigils). They're usually meant to do it on each Sunday throughout the whole month, and submit the mean figure, though whether they always do so is between a pastor and his confessor.

This produces an “annual Mass count” figure for each parish which, in turn, goes to produce an overall diocesan figure. While any diocese's precise number in any one year should, it's fair to say, be regarded as being a little fuzzy around the edges, the real value of these statistics is in enabling us to see how, in the long term, general trends play out.

As part of the research for a previous book, I spent a lot of effort contacting every diocese, and asking for their Mass count numbers, going back as long as possible. This allows us to set a sort of loose “base rate” of expected annual increase or decrease. For dioceses in England and Wales, there is an average drop in churchgoing of 2.3 per cent from year to year over the five-year period to 2017. The figure for dioceses in the US is very similar. Why Mass going is growing or falling, where, and by how much is a topic for another book.

Several other factors will of course complicate matters, but as I see it, there are three main pandemic-related factors likely to impact Mass attendance negatively, over and above business-as-usual. First, people are dying. There is no point in sugar-coating this most brutish of facts. Furthermore, we have no

solid idea yet what the final death toll will be. Like many of you, each day I get my fix of news and commentary from several sources; also like you, I've heard and read wildly divergent and ever-changing estimates of the ultimate death toll over the past months.

The most authoritative US projections vary enormously but put the top end of the number of deaths from Covid at 240,000. This amounts to roughly 0.05 per cent – 1 in every 2,000 people – of the total US population. The estimated probability of dying from Covid for UK citizens in the bleaker scenarios is not dissimilar. Nothing I write is intended to diminish its magnitude as a human tragedy. As Pope Benedict once beautifully put it: “Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”

IF CATHOLIC churchgoers were a perfect microcosm of the general populace, then that's the kind of small percentage decrease one might expect as a direct result of Covid-19 deaths, in addition to the base rate. In fact, they're not, in all sorts of ways. Catholic Massgoers are significantly older than the wider population. Inevitably, this means that church communities will be harder, perhaps even several times harder, hit than the average. Critically, the flip-side to all this is that churches have an outsized responsibility to help *now*.

Every parish has the contact details of both significant numbers of at-risk or otherwise vulnerable people, and significant numbers of people well able to (social-distance-compliantly) run errands, do shopping, collect prescriptions, or bribe small children to draw

felt-tipped pictures of rainbows or pirates.

Second, the number of immigrants into England and Wales will slow down, which means fewer people frequenting parishes. In Britain, as in the US and very many other places – first- and second-generation immigrants make up a disproportionate number of those Catholics actually at Mass on a Sunday. The current chaos has greatly disrupted the normal flow of people in, out, and around countries, and looks set to do so for months if not years to come.

Whatever one's view about this or that aspect of government policy, the Catholic community is certainly a net beneficiary of immigration in terms of laity, clergy, and Religious. In fact, with the Catholic birth rate not being quite what it used to be, and high levels of lapsation and disaffiliation, this immigrant effect is all the more important to Catholic pastoral vitality. I have no specific numbers to suggest here, but this period will almost certainly have a negative effect, at least in the short term. Sure, many of those who would have come here to work this year, will simply come next year instead. But I very much doubt that all will, especially not in light of corona-virus' significant economic side effects.

THIRD, WE ARE creatures of habit. Old habits may die hard, but once dead, they may well revive hard too. What I'm trying to say is this: difficult though it may be to imagine, not everyone who sits in Mass on a Sunday does so "fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and" – to the best of their knowledge, at least – "enriched by its effects" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 11). Some people keep attending despite knowing full well that they're "only doing so" because, well, they did last week. For others, it is only after a period of *not* going for some other reason, that they realise they don't especially miss it, or at least not enough to do much about it.

This is common, for example, when people move to a new area, or go off to college, and never quite get round to "finding" a new church. For others, the habit just sort of slips, from every week, to most weeks to, well, "We'll definitely make sure we go next week ..." There have now been several studies asking Catholics why they stopped practising, and, in among a suite of other reasons and factors, these observations hold very consistent across them all.

Such people have, one might say, little "intrinsic motivation" for attending Mass. They go because they always have, or because they feel vaguely that they ought, or because they never quite had the heart to tell Mum they don't really want to anymore (little suspecting Mum secretly feels the same way). Now this is certainly not true of everyone.

There are plenty of Catholics feeling near-viscerally starved of the sacraments, and who are longing for restrictions to lift "more than watchmen for daybreak" (Psalm 130:11). But I fear it is almost certainly true of a decent minority even of weekly Massgoers. And for them, a period of weeks or months when they can't go to Mass might easily be the nudge

required to stop altogether. This will be especially true if, as seems likely, we will have a long period where people *can* go to church again, but when being part of a large gathering is still widely viewed, and possibly officially cautioned against, as an "unnecessary risk". In such a situation, certain groups may well be very strongly advised to stay home. Many others, "out of an abundance of caution", might well agree. Again, I have no specific figures to add here. But I think it's likely this factor alone will cause a drop in Mass attendance by at least a couple of percentage points.

These three factors will play out differently across different parishes and dioceses. But all will, I fear, be hit to some extent by the third factor: and those areas already hard-bitten by generational decline may be hit very hard indeed.

Bishops would also be well advised to think ahead about the likely effect on their numbers of active clergy. The average age for a priest in Ireland or Britain hovers around 70. A 2009 study estimated the average age of US priests to be 63, and based on past trends (the average age in 1970 was 35), that's likely to have risen in the past decade. Older men seem to be a doubly at-risk demographic to begin with (intersectionality is ruthless like that). What's more, being the "good shepherds" I know the vast majority of our priests to be, large numbers are likely to have risked their own health in tending to their flocks.

Many dioceses' clergy are already well over-stretched, serving two, three, or more churches, in addition to other responsibilities. Whether this is, in the strictest sense, due to a shortage of priests is a debatable point: in England and Wales the actual priest-per-practising-Catholic ratio is as good, if not better, than it has been for decades. The sadder truth is that, in many places, we have vastly fewer of both clergy *and* (especially active) laity than we used to. However, we eke them out over an inherited parish infrastructure, built in better times to accommodate many more of each.

Biting this particular bullet has been on the cards for many years in lots of dioceses. Yet the trouble with all those "If present trends continue, by 2030 we'll have only X number of priests to serve just Y number of active worshippers"-type diocesan restructuring proposals is that "present trends" haven't "continued". When the dust finally settles on the Covid-19 crisis, dioceses may well find the trends have been fast-forwarded by at least several years, with significantly fewer priests and laypeople than anticipated even in the most "realistic" projections.

In the middle of this corona storm, without distracting from the media's and public's understandable focus on death tallies, infection rates, or how "flattened" or "spiky" a given state or country's curve is looking, a good deal of attention is being given to the economy's future ability to "bounce back". This is good and important. But the economy of salvation

is an immeasurably greater contributor in the grand scheme of things to the "common good". And Christians' capacity to help its shareholders' reap their dividends – "For to everyone who has will more be given, and they will have an abundance" (Matthew 25:29) – depends on our ability, both individual and collective, to "bounce back".

As Pope Francis said in his recent interview with Austen Ivereigh for *The Tablet*: "[The] aftermath has already begun to be revealed as tragic and painful, which is why we must be thinking about it now ... I'm living this as a time of great uncertainty. It's a time for inventing, for creativity ... What we are living now is a place of metanoia (conversion), and we have the chance to begin. So let's not let it slip from us, and let's move ahead."

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