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Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

One hallowed sanctuary is sadly no more

FEW things in life are more consoling for this columnist, than visiting an empty church. From the frenetic bustle of the street, you enter a silent space suspended between two worlds. Nothing can be heard except the prayerful whispers of the odd penitent or the feint chiming of the church bells.

Some years ago, I entered a local church in search of that solace. I was accompanied by two of my sons. As usual, we sat before the altar knowing that, for Catholics at least, this was a place of timeless significance.

Despite being old and in need of repair, that church contained something very special. Immediately, I was transported back to my youth, a time when our sacred sanctuaries were alive with true faith. In those moments, I felt part of what Edmund Burke called 'the great primeval contract of eternal society'.

As it happens, the church in question was served by a religious order known as the Salvatorians, or The Society of the Divine Saviour. Founded in 1881 by German priest Francis Mary Jordan, the Salvatorians have been in Ireland for over 30 years. Part of their apostolate is 'to serve in any place, by all ways and means which the love of Christ inspires'.

As my sons and I savoured the silence, we noticed a priest quietly strolling up and down the side aisle. He was reverently reciting the Rosary. In this age of spiritual apathy, this was a rare but inspiring sight that left a deep impression on my children.

The priest was Fr Eric Powell, the longest-serving Salvatorian in the parish. A profoundly refined and courteous man, Fr Powell was responsible for preserving many of the old devotions which gave his church its spiritual charm. It was, however, his uncommon, yet humble holiness that attracted my sons. The Salvatorians had created a unique atmosphere in a parish where Catholicism is still vibrant. Quietly and unassumingly, they proved it is possible to marry the great traditions of the Church with modernity. They did so simply by celebrating the sacraments in a spirit of sanctity and joy.

Attending that church reinforced my conviction that nothing binds a community like religion. Great priests like Fr Powell keep parishioners focused on the sacraments. In so doing, they come to realise theirs is a common destiny sustained by collective beliefs. To belong to a church is to share in the jubilation of new life. It is

to celebrate when two become one, and to weep when, at journey's end, our dear departed go forth to receive their eternal reward. And while we may not personally know those being baptised or buried, our lives are somehow mystically intertwined.

It was in Fr Powell's church that my eldest son had his first real experience of community. After Mass, he was regularly invited by Anne to assist in stripping the altar. He would then have a chat with Josie while, in the background, a group of parishioners recited Morning Prayer.

I've never asked Anne or Josie their surnames, but I know they are both in their 80s. Indeed, we have never shared anything more than a few conversations while sitting in a pew. And yet, because of our common devotion to the Church, we are bound together in deep and lasting affection. In this era of alienation, when estrangement is the norm, the Church continues to satisfy our spiritual, social and moral needs. It provides a family in faith for the widow, orphan and stranger. And it does so through the loving actions of ordinary people.

IF I say all this now, it is because, after 30 years of dedicated service, the Salvatorians will relinquish control of our local church next Sunday. They will do so due to a shortage of vocations and the increasing pressure on a small order in this time of religious scepticism. This means that, overnight, a parish that has enjoyed decades of unbroken continuity, will be abruptly severed from its past.

The parishioners are devastated. Like my sons, they have been moved by the spiritual passion of priests in love with their Creator. And now, as the church is handed back to the Archdiocese of Dublin, they face an uncertain future. Still, how many parishes around Ireland can boast of such clerical continuity? Indeed, with vocations in freefall, there are an increasing number of churches now served by visiting priests.

That said, I shall be forever grateful to Fr Powell for showing my children the real meaning of sanctity. At a time of rotten role models, my boys caught a glimpse of the spiritual heights to which the human spirit can soar. In the silence of that empty church, they witnessed something truly sublime. Soon, the sight of that saintly priest strolling through his church in prayer will be no more. But, as my sons discovered last Sunday, not everything will change. For there, as usual, Josie sat smiling in the front row — a sure sign that, even in the absence of the father, the family will stand firm.

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