Godspell 7th July 2024 Saint Anthony's Parish Clontarf

Out of Darkness by Austin Iverrigh

During July/ August the Parish Newsletter takes a break. I would like to invite and encourage you over the coming weeks, to read this article which was written in The Tablet Magazine on 20th February this year by Austin Iverrigh.

It was inspired by a book entitled "**Afternoon Christianity"** by a visionary Czech. Priest- philosopher, Fr Tomas Halik, who sees the crisis facing the Church heralding not the extinction of Christianity, but its transformation.

The old category of dividing belief from unbelief, practicing from non-practicing are insufficient.

A extract from the article will be printed each week. Perhaps you could read it as an alternative to my sermon!

Fr Larry

It was in a parish hall in Miskin, outside the Welsh capital, at the urging of Archbishop Mark O'Toole (named in April 2022 as *both* Archbishop of Cardiff *and* Bishop of Menevia) who wanted us to consider the prospect of formally merging the two dioceses into one. No surprises there. Faced with nosediving numbers, such mergers are being considered across England and Wales, with Rome's blessing. The point of this shake-up is not just to rationalise and cut costs. No one quite articulates this, but something bigger is afoot: a reset, a shake-up. For a long time we've been in "emergency mode", is how the archbishop explains it, and we can't go on like this. We have to consolidate and cooperate for the sake of mission, in a Church where parishes are *both* spread out over a large and diverse territory (Menevia includes Welsh-speaking Catholics, Cardiff the English periphery of Herefordshire) *and* shrinking and ageing.

The crisis is not a shortage of priests, but a shortage of *people*. England and Wales have one of the highest ratios of priests to lay people in the world. The archdiocese of Cardiff, spread over 1,180 square miles, has 131,280 Catholics (8.4 per cent of the population) but just 8,276 at Mass, down from roughly 20,000 in 1990 and 14,000 in 2019, just before Covid snatched more than a third of them, never to return. The ancestral rural diocese of Menevia, spread over 3,590 square mile s, has just over 26,000 Catholics (three per cent of the population) and 4,650 at Mass, compared with roughly 12,000 in 1990 and 6,000 in 2019. The trend will continue to slump.

So you'd imagine that this meeting on 10 February would be sombre, even grumpy: competing narratives to explain the decline and to vindicate agendas; sadness about the future; a painful sense of loss, especially of the young; a sense, perhaps, of failure. I've often found such desolation in our parishes these days, speaking around the country about the Synod. Yet the Miskin meeting had none of those craters: it was upbeat, and creative. No magic wands were waved, but we saw change coming, and the grace in welcoming it. Horrified at the prospect of ageing, beleagured enclaves, we sat round tables imagining a future of mucking in together for mission. People said this would need a culture change: you can't go on in the same way, can you? You have to go out, learn to listen, hear from the young who don't want to come in, and the elderly who since Covid stay away. We have to learn to share ministries and resources for mission, go beyond boundaries, build bridges and synergies. We need to create means of decision-making in common, through strong local deaneries and a diocesan pastoral council. One person at my table said synodality had re-energised her parish, and she now realised how key it was to the future.

I doubt anyone in Miskin that day had read Tomáš Halík's *Afternoon of Christianity: The Courage to Change*, published in English this week. It's been swirling around inside my head for many months: the Czech priestprophet has penned the most compelling, thorough account of what Pope Francis means by this being a "change of era" in the Church. The shift is much bigger than most realise, one that requires re-imagining much of what we take for granted. But before letting Halík himself explain that change, let's name the key spiritual move being made here.

TO BE CONTNUED NEXTWEEK