



A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

The FURROW

Bridie Stringer

The Ecclesial Mystery Shopper

June 2020

The Ecclesial Mystery Shopper

Bridie Stringer

We have become familiar with the concept of ‘mystery shoppers’ those who are tasked with evaluating products or services on behalf of a service provider. They are, in effect, pseudo-customers who feed back their evaluation as part of corporate quality assurance. I have never been cast formally in the role of ‘mystery shopper’ but, by nature, tend to be one who might ask challenging questions and be an advocate for those who are unsure about how to proceed. In the supermarket, I will not ignore the spillage of goods on the floor in case they become slipping hazards for those who might be seriously injured in the event of a fall. What has this to do with theological reflective practice? Quite simply, since the ‘product range’ provided in the name of local Church includes the compassion and pastoral pragmatism of the parish priest, the quality of the liturgical celebration, the effectiveness of safeguarding systems and the upkeep of the building and facilities, evaluation of these aspects of ministry should be part of diocesan oversight and ongoing reflection. The reflections of the ‘mystery parishioner’ might therefore be a more accurate litmus test of parish life than the visitation of the bishop for which preparations of people and presbytery are undertaken assiduously prior to his well- advertised arrival. This article is constructed in the light of my experience as a type of ‘mystery parishioner’ over a number of years i.e. as a visitor to parishes in the UK, Ireland and the USA. I have omitted the names of the parishes so that the comments are not received uncharitably by those directly concerned.

GEOGRAPHY AND ECCLESIOLOGY

These two disciplines are not normally associated, but we are now more attuned to social and cultural characteristics which are reflected and honoured in the way worship is presented and received. We are aware of chaplaincies within parishes dedicated to preserving the liturgies of diaspora communities in our midst. One of the most obvious examples of this is the blessing of Easter

Bridie Stringer, formerly an associate lecturer in Pastoral Theology in St. Mary’s University.

food which is a hallmark of the Easter celebration within Polish communities. Masses are celebrated in the vernacular of immigrant groups who wish to preserve their own ecclesial identity whilst being also absorbed into the faith life of the places where they have now settled. My own observations in this article relate to my experience as a ‘mystery parishioner’ over a number of years, noting the differences and nuances and how I have responded to them.

MY IRISH EXPERIENCE

When I visited four different parishes. I was struck by the significant differences between my life as a parishioner in south-eastern England and the liturgical ethos of the Irish Church in the places I visited. Clearly, the specifics of the four parishes cannot fairly be extrapolated to the entire Catholic Church in Ireland, but there may be some aspects of my experience which resonate elsewhere.

I was very aware of the absence of any parish Welcomers at the Sunday Masses I attended. Parishioners picked up their bulletins/newsletters from the porch or at the back of the church as they entered but there were no designated people to ensure that they were welcomed or given the leaflets. There were no Mass books, laminated *Ordinary of the Mass* cards or weekly ‘missalettes’ – (a priest friend calls them “rustlettes” as the sound of the turning pages at key points in the Mass irritates him!) to ensure that the members of the congregation could respond during the liturgy. As it happened, many of them didn’t. There were also no hymn books for congregational singing. In two of the churches, there were small groups of singers who ‘performed’ the hymns very ably while the members of the congregation were cast in the role of audience. In one of the churches, the priest sang the Communion Hymn with a few additional sporadic supporting voices – those who knew the words off by heart. As he was leaving the sanctuary, he sang one verse of *Abide With Me* as the Recessional Hymn and no one in the congregation sang along. St Augustine’s aphorism of singing and praying twice was not realised in any of the four parishes I visited. It was also very noticeable that the lay faithful received Holy Communion in the form of the sacred host only. The Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion received the Precious Blood from the chalice but the rest of the congregation did not. Perhaps this is an issue about the cost of providing large quantities of altar wine or the logistics of ensuring that there are no spillages. However, this deficiency, together with the lack of inclusion in the singing and the inability to articulate the responses delivered a rather impoverished celebration. I did not find these

THE FURROW

Masses good exemplars of ‘full, conscious and active participation’ and was pleased to return to my own parish with its welcomers, Mass leaflets, hymn books, Communion ‘under both kinds’ and a reflective Sunday Eucharist that lasted longer than 35 minutes.

ACROSS THE POND

This part of my reflection relates to an experience of Solemn High Mass celebrated in an American setting by former Anglicans who are now Roman Catholics in the Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of St Peter. The information leaflet on the church explained that in 1987 the Holy Father had approved the Anglican Usage of the Roman Rite for those former Anglicans who had become Roman Catholics. The Mass was a hybrid of Tridentine traditional vestments, Cranmer vernacular of the ‘liveth and reigneth’ variety, prayers from the Sarum Missal, the Mozarabic Rite, the Gallican Sacramentary and the hymns of William Byrd. The faithful did not actively participate in any of the liturgical ministries in the manner of my parish church at home but this was *their* celebration. Communion was dispensed by the celebrant from a combined ciborium/chalice which enabled him to intinct each communion wafer in the chalice and then place it directly on the tongue of the communicant. There was no opportunity to receive the consecrated host in the hand or to drink from the sacred vessels.

The Altar Servers Guild, featured on the parish website is described as:

“... a confraternity of men and boys of the parish dedicated to the service of the Altar and graced with the privilege of assisting the Pastor and clergy in the conduct of public worship, the celebration of Holy Mass, and the performance of the Divine Office.”

Interestingly there was also a quotation ascribed to Bernard Cardinal Griffin of Westminster :

“To serve at the altar, as to sing in the choir, is next to the priesthood the highest privilege which a human can enjoy. He represents the faithful and takes a most intimate part in the rich treasures of the church’s liturgy and ceremonial. Those sacred ceremonies should be carried out with devotion, dignity and attention to detail.”

Cardinal Griffin’s undated citation might be understood to come from a contemporary prelate in the Church in England and Wales

but in fact he died in 1956, three years before Pope St John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council.

Overall, what I experienced here was a radical ecclesiology in terms of the reconciliation of some former High Anglicans with the Holy See. However, in terms of gender inclusivity, cultural accessibility and a celebration of the priesthood of all the faithful, this worship reflected a spirituality which was certainly pre-Vatican II, if not indeed pre-Vatican I. The architectural notes on the design of the church stated that the rood beam above and the communion rail below served to delineate sacred space, distinguishing the nave from the chancel and framing the sanctuary with its high altar raised on steps in the apse. According to the notes, these marked 'the ancient tripartite structure of Christian churches and reflect the three parts of the Jewish Temple with the nave corresponding to the Inner Court, the chancel representing the Holy Place, and the sanctuary imaging the Holy of Holies'. Of the faithful gathered together for Solemn High Mass on that June day I may well have been the only discomfited member of the congregation. The church was packed with families in their Sunday best (no casual clothing, although the outside temperature was in the mid 30sC) and some of the women wore black lace mantillas. Here was an assembly of former Anglicans who had been welcomed into the Roman Catholic fold and could retain what they most venerated from their own traditional form of liturgy. They took pride in a carefully crafted liturgy which honoured both traditions in a most reverent manner. This was radical worship – radical in its newness but ultra-conservative in its liturgical style and content. The assembly clearly venerated Pope Benedict. Not only was much of the homily taken up in praise of the Pontiff but also the weekly newsletter had the banner 'Long Live Pope Benedict XVI' across the top.

More recently, in the pontificate of Pope Francis, I attended Mass in two Roman Catholic American churches. One was celebrated in Lithuanian and since I have no linguistic ability when it comes to Indo-European languages, I spoke the responses in English and the faithful around me did not seem to mind. I was conscious that in the long prayers the tone of the celebrant's voice indicated exactly when I needed to respond. The language of heart and spirit was sufficient to make my presence meaningful and prayerful. The second Mass was celebrated in English and I was somewhat surprised by the choice of sacred music. The celebration began with an organ instrumental set which included *The Stars and Stripes*, *God Save the Queen* and the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, so I felt that, in terms of national identities, all bases were covered. The sung recessional hymn was *God Bless America* and this too intrigued me as I wondered which version of America was being

THE FURROW

prayed for - the country which gave succour to those huddled masses yearning to break free or the one building a stout wall to keep out its neighbours.

BACK HOME

The final testimonies as ‘mystery parishioner’ again flag up some significant ecclesiological differences in terms of inclusion and priestly identity. The first celebration took place on what was termed ‘Name Badge Sunday’. On arrival at the church, the welcomers invited the worshippers to write their first names on a adhesive label which was then displayed on their lapel all to see. This enabled those attending to give the sign of peace to their neighbour, using their actual first name. Similarly, at communion time, the priest used the communicant’s name when ministering the consecrated host. ‘Body of Christ, Bridie’ was for me a breathtaking moment. To be acknowledged in that manner by a celebrant who actually looked me in the eye was moving, personal and powerful. My second experience could not be more different. This Mass was celebrated by a priest whose seminary formation had been undertaken in Central Europe. His clerical persona indicated that, like the carefully delineated sanctuary in the American Church, the sanctuary in his parish church in England was very much *his* domain and that the lay faithful were perhaps not really welcome there. Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion did not cleanse the sacred vessels, despite the fact that they had held them reverently as they ministered to the communicating congregants. I noticed that they also did not bring the ciborium of reserved sacramental hosts from the tabernacle to the altar as I had seen in other churches. After the Communion Rite, the cleansing of the sacred vessels was undertaken assiduously by the priest, who used his finger, rather like a bottle brush, which he dipped into the water in the chalice to cleanse the rim before turning the tipped vessel round to ensure that the water touched every part of the interior. This was then poured into the next vessel and the process repeated. This cleansing activity added about ten minutes to the Mass.

This liturgical fastidiousness, together with the exaggerated pronouncement of the words of consecration left me with the impression that the sacred power (*potestas*) of the priest was the dominant theological value in evidence rather than a gathering of the People of God, with Christ, not only present in the priest, but also in the gathered people, in the word proclaimed and in the sacred species – quite simply Christ *at* the table, *round* the table and *on* the table. Having been made aware of similar situations in

other parishes as a result of an influx of clergy who have received their seminary formation in a very different ecclesiological setting to that of the contemporary Church in England and Wales, my ‘mystery parishioner’ message to episcopal leaders would be that, in the event of a presbyter shortage, any priest will *not* do. Robust contextualised preparation, ongoing spiritual direction and a respect for a theologically-savvy lay faithful are *key* factors in providing inspirational parish leaders who listen to their people, value and respect lay ministry within the parish and cherish their presence as leaven in the loaf for feeding the world beyond the confines of the church. They have, after all, been urged to go out and glorify the Lord with their lives.

CONCLUSION

In concluding my reflection, may I suggest that one of the roles of Diocesan Pastoral Councils might be the deployment of some ‘mystery parishioners’ from time to time as *one way* of reflecting upon the quality of the pastoral care of individual parishes and to contribute to the development goals of incumbent clergy, particularly those for whom supervision, pastoral appraisal or ongoing spiritual direction may be unknown territory. I recall some years ago when clergy appraisal systems were being discussed, one of the priests at the meeting wondered who was qualified to appraise him. I think he took the view that he was above and beyond those types of secular evaluations. I would respectfully suggest that those ‘qualified’ to evaluate him as a servant of the living God, would be his peers in sacred orders, those to whom and with whom he ministers, the bishop to whom he has made a solemn promise of obedience and the law of the land. Perhaps the lines of Tennyson’s *Ulysses* sum up the dynamics of what I have tried to express here:

I am a part of all that I have met;
 Yet all experience is an arch wherethro’
 Gleams that untravell’d world whose margin fades
 For ever and forever when I move.

It is a complex journey and yet a simple one, back to the God who created us. *Wherever* we are in the world, our liturgy should offer us refreshment stops along the way, to meet with other travellers, to rest a while, to take nourishment and receive helpful direction if we need it and to raise our hopes that we will arrive safely and joyfully at journey’s end. Ecclesiology and geography do indeed go together.