

St Mary's Roman Catholic Church

Methodology: Staring from lived experience.

My project with St Mary's Roman Catholic Church began with an informal chat with one of the parish priests. I then wrote a letter to him outlining my project and seeking for his permission to spend sometime with his congregation. This was discussed with the church leaders and permission was granted for me to carry out the project. I was then invited to meet the other priests in the team over lunch. Since there were 6 churches in All Saints Parish it was decided that it would be best if I studied the main church, St Mary's. On my first visit the priest introduced me and told the congregation why I was there and that I was going to be with them for the coming months. I went to St Mary's whenever I could. While I was with the congregation, I observed what was going on, and administered a detailed questionnaire.¹ I sent a copy of the questionnaire before hand to the parish priest. His remarks are worth noting. He stated; *'The language/ concepts are not quite how we talk in the Catholic Community, so it will both challenge some, confuse others, and stretch us all.'* Nonetheless, he agreed to have the questionnaires distributed. Theoretically, he liked to give out materials after mass so as not to distract people from their prayers. However, he gave me permission to distribute the questionnaires as people came into church and allowed time for them to fill them in at the start of the service. He encouraged people to fill in the questionnaires. The questionnaire provided a guide for a structured interview. Completed questionnaires were returned to me before people left the church although some requested more time to have a think about some of the questions. This was repeated at the 11:15am Mass so nobody was missed out. 70% of the 200 questionnaires handed out were completed and returned. 20% were not completed. 10% were completed and returned the following week. During the 11:15 Mass there were lots of visitors as 6 children received first communions. Despite a higher attendance than on an average Sunday a number of questionnaires were returned uncompleted. This was thus because there were lots of visitors who did not fill in the questionnaires.

I also carried out a series of semi-structured interview with the priests and members of the congregation. I looked at church records and material on display in church. I attended church meetings, activities and social gatherings to investigate how members of the congregation expressed themselves in the community. A number of people spoke to me. I developed a relationship with the congregation. This enabled me to get over my initial fears of how I was going to be received as an Anglican woman priest carrying out research in a Roman Catholic Church.

2. Experience

2.1 Organisation of the Church.

St Mary's defines itself as Roman Catholic Church. Newport has 4 Roman catholic Parishes namely; St Patrick's, St Gabriel's, St Julius, Aaron and David, and All Saints Churches. St Mary's is one of the six churches in All Saints Parish. The other churches are; St Anne, St Basil and Gwladys, St David Lewis and St Michael. The Church is situated in the centre of the city of Newport in Stow Hill Council Ward. This council ward covers an area of 130 hectares. According to the 2001 census the population of stow Hill council ward was 4,453². In 2001, the ethnic

¹ See Appendix Questionnaire

² Census 2001, Newport City Council, Office for National Statistics.

profile was; white 91.0%, Black 1.0%, Asian- Pakistani 3.0%, Asian- other 2.9%, mixed 1.3%, Chinese 0.5%, other 0.3%, Welsh 11.2%³ St Mary's is located in an area surrounded by business buildings. The dwelling type of the ward is 48.1% terraced. 57% of the 4,453 households in the ward were owner occupied. There are a few other Christian churches in Stow Hill ward besides St Mary's. The nearest in proximity is Bethel Temple. St Woolos Anglican Cathedral is not far away from St Mary's and so are Haverlock Street and Stow Park Presbyterian, Methodist Church, St Mary's Street Baptist, the Salvation Army, St Paul's Anglican Church and Welsh Presbyterian Church. Other places of worship are the Spiritualist church and a mosque.

The middle of the 19th Century saw the influx of immigrants arriving from Ireland. As observed by Hornby-Smith;

'Irish immigration having had such numerical impact on the English Catholic community was likely also to have strongly influenced the character of the Church in Britain as it emerged from the post-reformation nadir over the past two centuries'⁴ Most if not all of the immigrants from Ireland were Roman Catholics who brought their religion with them. Edward Curran's observation on this subject is worth noting, He writes;

"The population of the town was now about 10,000 and increasing at a phenomenal rate, and the number of Catholics approaching 2,000. The Port records state that the sloop 'Joseph' from Clonakilty arrived on the 8th April 1835 with 36 pigs and 68 passengers. The 'Catherine' arrived from Cork with 98 passengers in excess of her authorized number. She was observed unloading passengers two miles from the Watch Tower. The Master of 'Mary' from Cork was prosecuted for bringing more than twenty passengers. When the vessel left Cork, forty-six passengers were on board and seventeen were put ashore in a boat at the mouth of the Usk and a number were forced into the mud"¹.

Newport therefore became a major centre for Catholicism. In 1812 a small chapel was built on the site now occupied by St Mary's Catholic Church on Stow Hill. St Mary's church was opened in 1840. It has a grade 2 listed status with seating capacity of 350. It is Victorian Gothic. The organ is housed in the balcony. There are several chapels. Starting in the lady chapel and running anticlockwise around the church is the 'way of the cross' with panels of traditional 'stations' of the cross. At the back of the sanctuary is a stone reredos which houses the Tabernacle of the presence of the Lord. The statue of our Lady presenting the Christ-child is pure alabaster. Over the years it has had a number of alterations and extensions added to it. 1904 saw the building of the Institute / reflectory 'Stute. This is used for church and community events and it was where refreshments, coffee, tea and squash were served before and after the service. I found this space useful for informal conversations. The adjacent presbytery houses the four priests attached to the 6 Parishes. There is office space for the parish and marriage care.

Until 1915 Newport was the main Roman Catholic centre in Wales. (on the Eastern coast: Merthyr Tydfil developed at the same time, and Swansea was also growing: The reality is that Cardiff was a very small port at this time, Newport still the main port). It is now part of the Archdiocese of Cardiff.

³ Ibid, Pg 83.

⁴ Hornby – Smith, **Roman Catholics in England 1987, 118 He looks at the relationship between the catholic community and the wider society. His work has established empirical evidence concerning in particular the Roman Catholics in England and Wales.**

Throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries, Irish people played a prominent part in the development of Newport, although they were accepted with reluctance when they came as refugees from the Irish famine of the 1840's. Some of my informants were of Irish descent and gave me a brief encounter of their ancestors experiences in Newport. Their stories echoed what Hilaire Belloc once observed, '*our official history, has taught by continual suggestions and by taking it as if it were for granted that the English people were in some fashion naturally antagonistic to catholicism*'⁵

2.2 Christian background of the congregation

In response to Q 2 Were you raised in this tradition? (Tell me how you came to decide on this church)⁶ Informants cited their background and a number of reasons for their membership in St Mary's Roman Catholic church. There was a core of people who had been part of St Mary's all their lives. In fact a number stated that they were 'cradle catholic' And yet another stated, 'I am a catholic because I was born to catholic parents and was educated in a catholic school. Typically they had been brought up in the catholic tradition. Other responses were 'was born and baptised catholic. Others had moved to the area and the congregation in the past 20years or so and a few who had become involved recently some even in the period I was visiting. Yet some commented they had converted from Anglicanism. Some people had switched to the Roman Catholic Church from other churches precisely because its stance on moral issues is uncompromising. Regardless of their varied backgrounds everybody seemed to get on well. Several informants spoke of parish amalgamations and closures which have resulted in a sense of insecurity for the future of their parish.

2.3 Leadership

St Mary's like all Roman Catholic churches is organised as a hierarchy under the leadership of the pope. Anthony Archer quotes Graviere who writes, 'The Church is incontestably a monarch, more soberly, the Church is hierarchically structured society, of which the invincible head is Christ and of which the visible head is the pope, vicar of Christ. The whole of the power appertains to the pope and to the bishops who constitute the Church teaching and governing.'⁷

Hence, the priests are appointed to the parishes by the bishop. St Mary's comes under the archdiocese of Cardiff. The leadership consists of 4 priests and 1 deacon in charge of 6 parishes. There was a Parish Advisory Council and a Parish Pastoral team. There are certain things that these six parishes have in common in terms of organisation and programmes. They share an institutional structure of governance through parish priests. As a result of amalgamation of Parishes, there was a newly formed Parish Council whose role was discernment, and to lead and develop the parishes of All Saints.

2.4 Church Activities

There were many other meetings and activities going on at St Mary's in addition to Sunday Masses. These included activities run by the community and those run by the church. These activities were held in the refectory and included among others, a weekly prayer meeting, Legion of Mary, Society of St Vincent de Paul, Social Club, Rainbows, Brownies and Rangers, Youth Group once a week with about 20 youths

⁵ **Roman Catholicism in England. From the Elizabethan settlement to the 2nd Vatican Council.** Edward Norman Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985 Pg. 4.

⁶ **Questionnaire**

⁷ Anthony Archer, **The two Catholic Churches**, 1997, 30.

attending. Marriage Care was available for couples preparing for Marriage, as well as offering counselling

These were attended by people drawn mainly but not exclusively from within the catholic Community. Other activities included coffee mornings, Slimmer's world, Civil Service Club, Cruise bereavement Group, Extended Exercise Group, Samba band, and Bingo/Quiz group. These were run by community groups who hired the hall for this purpose. The church held English classes once a week for speakers of other languages. In response to Q 7 What does St Mary's do particularly well. Some of the respondents observed that; *As a congregation we have been at the forefront of local support and welcoming all nationalities, migrants, asylum seekers and enabling them to settle in the community.*

2.5 Reflections on my visit.

I found the services / Mass to be very formal.

The Catholic Church describes the Mass as the source and summit of their worship⁸. The services I attended were Mass. The service included several hymns when the choir was present. At 11:15am Mass, the Psalms and Canticles were chanted led by the choir. In the absence of the choir which comprised of 7 women there were no hymns sung. The Psalm was sung with the choir taking the lead and canticles were chanted during the 9:00 o'clock Mass.

On Sundays the congregation gathers for Mass at 9:00am at which there is a Children's liturgy of the word, at 11:15am and at 6:00pm. Those leading Mass stood or sat at the far end of the building in a raised chancel area. When I was in conversation with members of this congregation, there was a sense that the Altar was the visual and the spiritual focus of the building. The congregation gathered around the Altar to recognise Christ's presence and make signs of his presence in the local community. There was one priest at the front assisted by extraordinary ministers of communion. They assisted with the distribution of communion. They did not wear any special clothing for this function. Each year new ministers of Communion are commissioned by the bishop on 'Corpus Christi' Feast of the body and Blood of Christ. This feast is held at the end of the Easter 50 days. Special ministers of the Eucharist either went out to the sick and housebound or distribute the elements during Mass.

The officiating priest wore traditional vestment; a white Alb over which was placed a stole and a chasuble of a coloured fabric according to the season of the liturgical calendar in seasonal colours. The Altar and pulpit linen were also in seasonal colours. The Altar servers wore red cassocks and surplice. The priest read all of the service from the English version of the Roman Missal translated into English in 1968. The priest read the gospel and all the congregation stood for this. Lay people commissioned by the bishop read the lesson and led the prayers of intercession and congregation was invited to make their intentions. The congregation listened to the Scripture reading. The bible version used was the Jerusalem Bible. There were no other bibles in sight. I would describe the theology of one of the priest's sermons as liberal. On most Sundays the sermon was based on the day's bible reading taken from the 3 year cycle. The same sermon was preached during the 3 Masses on Sunday. The sermon lasted for 10 – 15 minutes.

The children had their own activity for the first half of the service. When they rejoined the congregation, an opportunity was given for them to share their work with everyone.

⁸ Richard Conrad OP, *The Catholic faith*, 1994, 139

On Sunday the numbers of the congregation average about 200 attending each service.⁹ Some of the people I spoke to had come from the outskirts of Newport and some came to St Mary's because they didn't have a priest in their local Roman Catholic church. During the week there was a daily Mass which was well attended. The Sacrament of Reconciliation was held on Saturday. I did observe that going to confession was incorporated into Saturday afternoon shopping. Those who wanted a Mass said for their intention, or for the serious need of some one close to them, or in remembrance of someone who had died, were asked to write on an envelope the name of the person for whom the Mass was to be said, noting what the intention was (healing, thanksgiving; the repose of the soul). It was traditional to include in the envelope an offering for the priest. Prayers were frequently requested for all those who shared communion for the first time.

The congregation was made up of a mixed range of people but mostly people under the age of 65¹⁰, with a good number of families (mother, father and children). I observed that members of the congregation came from a diversity of ethnic backgrounds. In an interview with one of the Priests, he stated that; *'In recent years we've had people from the European Union. Majority came from (Poland) Slovakia. Others have come from the Philippines and from India.. Hence the emphasis on welcoming in people from other cultures'*.

Such an observation is compatible with what Hornby – Smith stated, 'Roman Catholics are of considerable social and political importance because they're a community with overwhelmingly immigrant origins and they represent an important example of assimilation to British society over many generations'¹¹

In this connection Hawkes states, 'Roman Catholics are a community in themselves, and they mix freely. Their religion is so strong, they don't have to define against colour. They just treat each other through their religion.'¹² Moreso, an informant who was of Polish descent stated that, the Catholic tradition was more like the immigrants and Asylum seekers experience in their country of origin. This meant that they could easily follow the service. However, all the services I attended were conducted in English. I wondered how much of the service speakers of other languages understood as most of them hardly spoke any English. My observations indicated that most of them stood or sat at the back.

The hymn numbers were not announced as they were displayed on the hymn board. On one occasion I could hardly hear the priest from the back and so did those I was sat with. They missed half of what was said. It was noteworthy that at some of the services the congregation arrived at the last minute and did not sing or respond very enthusiastically during the worship. This resonates with what Stringer observed¹³. I observed that not every member of the congregation made the sign of the cross with Holy water on entering the church for Mass.

The Catholic national papers were predominantly displayed at the back of the Church. Other papers included; Universe Catholic Herald and Times, Universe Catholic life, Bible Alive and Catholic People

⁹ Information obtained from church records. The number of those sharing Communion was recorded on the weekly sheet.

¹⁰ Information obtained from questionnaire Qn. 1 How old are you?

¹¹ Roman Catholics in England.

¹² Hawkes, B. As quoted in Baumann, Contestin Culture, 95.

¹³ Stringer, On the Perception of Worship, 112.

B: SACRAMENTS

St Mary's recognises 7 sacraments namely, Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Penance and reconciliation, Anointing of the sick, Holy Orders and matrimony. The seven Sacraments for Catholics represent the high points of their life and are closely related to the liturgy, the public worship of the Church.

Baptism

Some informants said that the children were brought in the first weeks of their life for baptism. They went further to suggest that the baptism ceremonies took place at Sunday Mass so that the congregation could welcome the child in the life of the Church. The parents were joined by godparents who were also Catholics and together they made promises to bring the child in the Catholic faith.

Infant baptism was held during mass following baptism preparation. There were Courses for parents preparing for baptism. After baptism, children age 12 years were encouraged to join the confirmation class. This was held once a year.

First communion- These are carried out throughout the year and there are lots of visitors. They sat with those making their first communion. It was obvious from their body language that they were not regular church goers.

Prayer;

Names of the sick printed on the weekly sheet to be remembered. Prayers said for the repose of souls. Prayer for all in the family of the parishes who were sick and housebound, and all who cared for them.

People were encouraged to tell the parish correspondent if they had someone to pray for.

E: Ecumenism

One of the priests I spoke to was keen to have links with the neighbouring churches, the Salvation Army, the Baptist church and the Anglican churches. However he commented that he found it frustrating trying to encourage members of the congregation to join in ecumenical events. He was keen on praying for unity and thought it was good to meet with fellow Christians, to discuss faith matters together, to pray with each other in appropriate ways and to co-operate in forms of witness and in charitable works. The congregation of St Mary's was urged to join other Christians from the Churches in Newport for Pentecost March of witness and to celebrate common faith in worship and fellowship. This began with a short service at the Cathedral then a march from the Cathedral into Belle- Vue Park, for service at bandstand area. There was a clown performance. Some informants said it was an impressive occasion. 'A lovely day' was a comment made by another informant who had taken part. The consensus on the event was that it was a success and worth doing again.

3. Exploration:

According to St Mary's Mission Statement, which is printed on the weekly bulletin, it is stated;

'St Mary's Parish in the centre of the City of Newport, accepts and has the responsibility to:-

Build up the parish as a family.

Foster our own knowledge and love of God.

Worship God in community, celebrating the Real Presence of Jesus.

Be a community which gives service to others.
Proclaim the Good News to everyone.

This reflects the desire to build and be part of the community. But how far could they go in defining their own mission task? Their understanding of their mission task incorporated a range of attitudes towards community work and activities. The following question explored the various definitions. Q.4 Say what you know about mission.

The word 'mission' was not one I encountered in this congregation. Some of the informants stated that they did not know what mission meant and some said they only knew what the priests had told them. However, the results show that mission was regarded as reaching out to others in the local community and beyond. Loving service to those in need, and social action for justice, outreach.

In response to the questions I was asking in relation to the Christian task, some of the informants stated that they saw this as witnessing to others, preaching to other people and reaching out. A similar observation was made by other informants who saw their Christian task as bringing the faith to those who lack faith or who need help with their faith and Spreading the Good news about Jesus to all God's people. In response to question 6 In St Mary's are there events in the life of the Church that you describe as mission? I was repeatedly struck by the emphasis on their local support for refugees and asylum seekers, collecting food, clothing and furniture for them and holding social events in the church to meet some refugee families. Some informants said that, *As members of the St Vincent de Paul Society they try to proclaim the Good news through actions, especially by helping out at the local soup kitchen'*

Whereas others said that 'Jesus taught that we should love our neighbour as ourselves(Mark 12:31) The went on to say, '*we try to put this into practice and find it to be a life-giving and fulfilling way to live.*' Hence they were involved in a variety of other charitable work such as caring for the sick and elderly. The Catechesis course and Church services were also cited by some as events they described as mission.

In question 5¹⁴ of the questionnaire texts popular in mission were cited as well as any other option as a way of ascertaining more about the theology of mission by the members of St Mary's church. There were a number of texts mentioned such as Matthew 28 The great commission, Luke 4:18ff. Other biblical texts included 1 Corinthians 13 which talks about love and some informants mentioned loving ones enemy as themselves and the Beatitudes.

St Mary's has a major role in the wider community through the Roman Catholic schools. There were strong links with the primary schools attached to the Church and the priests went into the schools for Catechesis and teaching.

Pupils, staff and families lead the mass on some occasions. One of the primary schools was named after St Mary's. The mission statement of St Mary's was thus; 'The school exists to provide and sustain an environment where the beliefs and values of the Catholic faith are developed and nurtured through providing each child with an education of the highest spiritual, moral and academic standards'. The other schools were St Joseph's primary and St Joseph's High school. St Joseph's High School was a large modern comprehensive School reflecting the continuing strength and identity of the catholic constituency in Newport to this day. They are voluntary Aided Schools with foundation governors appointed by the bishop. The church paid 15% towards building and maintenance of the schools. One of the schools in the parish made News headlines when it was closed in 2007 due to low population numbers. People came

¹⁴ See Appendix

together to protest its closure. One of my informants aged 12 stated: There was emphasis on Catholic identity.

RESPONSE: Conclusion.

What my months of observation and experience at St Mary's have led me to conclude is that the church takes seriously the local realities of life as an intergral part of its mission. The church was responding to the challenges posed by immigration and *national issues*. *The issue facing the congregation at the time I was visiting was* lobbying Parliament on the Human Fertilization and Embrology Bill. Members of the congregation were encouraged to fill in cards and send to the local Member of Parliament. Nevertheless, there was still a lot to do. There was no evidence of any provision for seekers or active drive to recruit new members. In fact one of the informants who had been on an 'ALPHA' course stated that there was no support for Process evangelism or any such courses and teaching material. Some of the young people who filled in the questionnaires felt that the church made no provisions for them. They often wanted to take a more active role in the Church. They felt they needed to be made to feel that they have an important role in the Church. Ecumenism needed to be taken up by the members of the congregation.

Questions raised from my observations.

- How do you divide up responsibilities among the priests?
- What is the Ethnic makeup of the congregation?
- What is your involvement with the Street pastors Project?

ⁱ Edward Curran, *St Mary's Catholic Church, Newport 1840 –1990*, Newport Printing 1990, Page 9