

Returning to the fold

Rising adult converts and immigrants cannot make up for the steady trickle of British cradle Catholics away from the Church. In the second part of our series on falling numbers, we look at programmes to help the lapsed find their way back to the faith

There is a hushed silence as, one by one, people recount their experiences of the Church. There might be anger and bitterness in these stories, but no one interrupts or questions what is said. For this is a meeting to help lapsed Catholics to find their way back to the Church and their faith, and the intention is to provide a safe and welcoming environment.

As *The Tablet* reported last week, the Church's own statistics show that it has lost 130,000 regular worshippers in the three years to 2005. Though the number of adults being received is steadily rising and Catholic immigration is revitalising many parishes around the country, the newcomers are not enough to make up for the exodus of existing British cradle Catholics. And when some of these decide they would like to come back, it can be difficult.

Some left because slowly but surely, and without even noticing it, they drifted away. Others walked out, refusing to accept Church teaching on a particular issue. Others left after a bad experience. A difficulty over marriage can often be the cause of alienation.

Today there are several programmes designed to encourage those who drift away from the Church but relatively few parishes use them. The most popular is Landings, which was imported to Britain from the United States in 2000 and now operates in around 40 parishes.

The importance of programmes like these is made clear when returners speak of feeling uncomfortable when they walked back into their local church for the first time, often after years away. "Everybody else seems to know each other. You are very lucky if anyone says 'hello' to you. You feel like a freak," says Hillu, a woman in her forties who completed the Landings programme at Ealing Abbey, west London, last year.

At that time she was living in a parish a few miles away and read about Landings on a website. It took her three months to pluck up the courage to enquire about it but once she walked into the first session she was certain she had done the right thing. "I had a 'wow' feeling. I did not expect to be made to feel so welcome. There were six or seven other people there making the effort to welcome me. It was fantastic. You didn't have to say very much at all in the first session. They guide you very slowly into it. You feel very safe and protected."

Hillu says she was able to share with the others her reasons for leaving: there were no other Catholics in her family and sustaining her faith alone had been difficult. Landings, she said, had given her a good foundation, something she very much needed now that she has moved away from London to a new parish where she knows no one.



Mary's experience is typical of those who leave the Church because of a specific doctrine. She stopped going to Mass in the 1960s because she objected to the Church's teaching on birth control. When she decided to return eight years ago she found her local church unfriendly. She persevered and even did a course at a neighbouring church but still does not feel she has fully integrated into her parish community.

Such cases highlight the difficulties facing would-be returners. Sheila Keefe, a volunteer catechist in Portsmouth Diocese, has more than a decade's experience helping to devise programmes to welcome lapsed Catholics. These are characterised by carefully structured meetings of small groups where welcomers heavily outnumber returning Catholics. The gatherings enable people to form what she describes as "faith friends", fellow Catholics they can turn to in times of difficulty.

Mrs Keefe, 71, embarked on her work with returning Catholics after the experience of being part of an RCIA programme in her then home parish of St Joseph's in Upminster, Essex.

She recalled one meeting when two lapsed Catholics aired their grievances in front of enthusiastic individuals preparing to be received into the Church.

"It was embarrassing and convinced me that returners need a whole new area and setting where they can work through their pain and anger," she told me. The initiative, called Roots, combined home visits and the Landings programme. One returner, Deborah, remembers it as a lifeline. She had stopped going to church at the age of 11 when she left primary school.

"We were told if we didn't do as we were told we would go to hell. Everything was about fear. I can't remember being told that God loved us. It was all about what would happen if you did wrong."

Deborah, now 45, chose to go to a non-Catholic secondary school, married in the Church of England and had both her children christened in an Anglican Church. "It was just what I needed at that time. I was angry and when I heard the other people speaking at the meetings it stirred up all the memories. It brought me back very easily and gave me a fresh approach," she said.

A huge amount of effort goes into attempts to welcome relatively few returners. Sheila Keefe is now involved in another initiative in Portsmouth Diocese called Keeping in Touch (Kits). This involved training parishioners to form small welcoming groups. They then organise about seven weekly meetings with non-churchgoers to explore issues around returning to the Church. There were talks at Mass, flyers and posters, and people who might be interested were contacted. In Mrs Keefe's own parish, only three people interested in returning came forward, although Mrs Keefe judged that to be about the kind of response to be expected in a small parish of around 200 Mass-goers.

Another popular tool used in Catholic churches both to introduce people to Christianity and help the lapsed is the Alpha Course. It was originally devised for Anglicans, but Catholic catechists and priests attest to its effectiveness. Fr Chris Brannan, who has been running Alpha courses in his parishes for eight years, believes that the key to its success is placing emphasis on Christ rather than the Church as an institution that can be shaken by scandals such as child abuse.

"People come together and have a focus.

They talk about their faith or their lack of it and through talking among themselves their faith becomes real," said Fr Brannan, who ran Alpha courses successfully in his previous parish and now is doing the same in Fraserborough and Peterhead in the north-east of Scotland. "They discover Jesus and one another. From that congregation you can then build a team that will organise small groups."

Like Fr Brannan, Clare Simpson, who has been running courses at St Teresa's Church, Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, for more than three years, finds that the Alpha course's simplicity is its greatest strength. For many lapsed Catholics, the Church is remote from their lives, and Alpha helps them discover a personal relationship with God. Ms Simpson stresses the importance of the social side of Alpha with a hot supper served at every session, a celebration meal held at the end of the course, plus regular gatherings after that.

The birth of children is a spur for many people to return to the Church. "They find they want their children baptised and have not been to Church in their twenties and thirties," said Ms Simpson. "Others may find that their children are asking them questions about God and they want to answer them."

But other strategies are needed for people with greater difficulties. In the mid-1990s, Fr Paul Watson hit on the idea of parish visitations to lapsed Catholics when he ran the parish of Our Lady of the Angels in Stoke-on-Trent. Using parish records, he and his helpers sent out letters simply asking people if they would like a visit. A few replied rejecting the offer but they were the exception.

"People were not so much disaffected but had lost contact. When we visited we did not try to address any problems; we just listened to them. After that they were more open to hearing the Gospel message," said Fr Watson, now director of the Maryvale Institute of Further and Higher Education in Birmingham. The results of the visitation were very positive: 60 per cent of those contacted either returned to the Church or were receptive to further contact.

In many ways reaching out to the unchurched is relatively straightforward. But much sensitivity is needed with returners: no cold calling, no pressure of any kind, nothing that can be misconstrued as judgement of past behaviour. Clare Ward of the Catholic Agency to Support Evangelisation (Case) acknowledges the difficulty but believes that Catholics themselves have to learn to recognise when someone they know might welcome an invitation to return.

"There comes a time in their lives when some people think about coming back. You have to look out for the signs," she said.

Whether people go back with help or of their own accord, the quality of welcome is important. A programme like Landings, Kits or even Alpha is a great help and more parishes need to think about adopting one.

Visit www.landingsuk.org.uk for more details. For details of Kits telephone Eileen Stephenson on 01329 835583, or email estephenson@prcdtr-parkplace.org

PETER STANFORD

'Orla practises her Mother's Day hymn. I tell myself, it's not an anti-dad diatribe'



They are preparing for the annual Mother's Day Mass at Kit and Orla's school. In recent years, there has been a laudable but limited effort to be inclusive. Fathers may also attend, a note popped in the book bags tells us. It doesn't add that this concession is the chaps' only chance. There won't be a similar event come Fathers' Day in June.

So we're to be if not quite gatecrashers then just extras. Last year, the handful of men in the congregation weren't invited up on to the altar along with the mums to be given a daffodil. In one sense, thank God, since none of us was probably confident enough in our masculinity to have risen to the challenge of looking butch while clutching a wilting yellow flower.

My mother, who had a low opinion of Americans based on her wartime experiences of them in Liverpool, dismissed Mother's and Father's Days as commercialism wrapped in sentiment, invented on the other side of the Atlantic and exported over here along with bad spelling, gingham and nuclear weapons (even though Mothering Sunday is an ancient tradition). So there were no cards or gifts on Mothers' Day in our house back then. And definitely no special Mass at my school.

In later years she softened and was visibly enchanted by Grandparents' Day – even after I (probably sourly) pointed out that it had been invented by an American card company. But that seems to be the joy of grandparenthood – the chance to replace all those awkward child-rearing principles with indulgence and delight.

So most mornings Orla wanders round the kitchen practising her Mother's Day Mass hymns. "Who gets me up for school each day/And holds my hand along the way?/My mummy does these things for me/She does them because she loves me." Let it go, I tell myself. Be generous. It's a harmless hymn, not an anti-dad diatribe. On she trills: "Who gets my dinner, cleans my clothes." And who does some of the time, I ask, unable to keep quiet any longer but trying desperately to

sound neutral. She thinks for a moment, no doubt spotting my clenched teeth. "You and mummy." That's my girl. We operate an equal opportunities policy.

By chance, I have just come back from a literary festival in the Lake District where I added some ballast to a platform debate on the "crisis in masculinity" between Joan Bakewell and Michael Buerk. It was good knockabout stuff as we all tried and failed to define what were masculine and feminine virtues. Joan Bakewell even claimed the credit on behalf of her generation for nurturing today's hands-on dads. But there was a serious point in there too, as audience questions made clear.

A disturbing number of young men don't know what they are meant to be doing. The jobs that required physical strength have all but gone in our call-centre economy. Old male virtues of stoicism, stiff-upper-lip and bottled-up emotion have been rubbished by a generation of male political leaders who pride themselves on being touchy-feely. And even the traditional male role in the home has been sidelined by young women who feel they can raise a family far better on their own.

I make a plea for two-way traffic. If women have increasingly populated what was once the male preserve of the workplace, then why shouldn't men feel free to play a greater role in the home and child-rearing? There are, of course, economic reasons. Nurturing roles have no economic status and we live in a society that increasingly judges everything only by its monetary value. But there are also psychological barriers. Too many of us still think it just isn't masculine to want to stay at home with your kids.

Which brings us back to Orla's hymn. It is hardly a rousing anthem for equality in the kitchen, is it? Coupled as it will be with a tribute to St Joseph's manly virtues in absenting himself with a hammer and nails, it will conjure up for Mass-goers a picture of all-female domestic perfection, which I'd hazard a guess is far removed from the realities of the homes of many of the children in that congregation.

If we believe in the importance of the family – and it is the bedrock of Catholic teaching – then perhaps we need to encourage today's hymn-writers to take a fresh but relevant lyrical look at the Holy Family. How about Mary knocking up a table and chairs while Joseph does the washing? And in the meantime I'm going to practise with a daffodil in the hope of avoiding my own crisis in masculinity.