

THE CATHOLIC HERALD

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How to fill those pews

A congregation in south London has almost doubled in size - but not by making its worship more "accessible"

by Jeremy de Satgé

We are all so used to reading depressing tales of how Mass attendance in churches continues to fall year after year, that I thought *Herald* readers might like to learn of one parish that has dramatically reversed trend.

Holy Ghost Catholic Church lies at the bottom of Nightingale Square in Balham, South London, a leafy and peaceful glade in the busy metropolis. The church building is not particularly impressive either in architectural style or size; but it is there that the average Sunday parish Mass attendance has risen over the last 8 years from just under 600 to over 1,100.

The reasons for this increase are various. The parish priest, Fr. Stephen Langridge, and his curate, Fr. Peter Gee, are traditional in outlook. They are not given to gimmicks to draw in the crowds. What they offer is a straight forward spiritually-based style of Catholicism.

Masses are celebrated with great dignity and emphasis is given to the spiritual benefits of the Sacrament of Confession. The preaching is orthodox and consistently good (if not occasionally too lengthy) and the priests do not shy away from talking about awkward subjects, such as birth control.

One reason for the increase in Mass attendance is the large numbers of young families that have either moved into the area or found reason to go to church. The age profile shows that the two largest groups being the under 10s and the 35-45 year-olds (young parents). This makes the average age of parishioner an astonishing 26 years.

Holy Ghost parish also boasts an excellent Primary School. Cynics might suggest that the Mass attendance is artificially high because of the number of parents wishing to get their children into the school. Over the past few years, the school has gone from having "serious weaknesses" to being one of the top 50 in the country, although this position varies according to different methods of calculation and may, of course, change at any time depending on SAT results. When visiting the school, one gets the distinct impression of its desire to succeed. Despite the limited number of places at the school, Mass attendance of young families continues to increase.

Recognising the need to give more children a Catholic education, the parish has been instrumental in founding a private Preparatory school, Oliver House, which opens its doors for the first time next term.

Lest I am giving the impression that the parish is a middle class haven of professional types, I should like to stress that the weekly congregation contains a fairly typical multi ethnic South London mix. There are many Irish, a surprising number of French and Spanish and a particularly impressive African contingent among other nationalities.

My own involvement with the parish for the past two years has been a professional one: as Music Director. We employ no guitars or banjos to help draw in the crowds. At the Family

Mass, I encourage children to lead the singing of the Communion Hymn and I direct a choir made up of parishioners at the more solemn 11.30 Mass.

We alternate between several Latin plainsong Mass settings and have been building up a repertoire of other Mass settings and Communion motets. I was delighted to receive an email recently from a French parishioner - a mother of 5 children under the age of 12 - who told me her children insist on attending the 11.30 Mass because they enjoy the music so much. So much for children not enjoying Gregorian chant!

The outreach (to use the modern parlance) of the Church is also impressive. Parishioners are constantly being encouraged to evangelise to their lapsed or non-Catholic friends and neighbours and invite them to attend Mass at Christmas and Easter.

Colourful and elegantly produced parish newsletters are produced at these feasts. Mornings and Evenings of Recollection for Women and Men - mini retreats - happen monthly.

Holy Ghost was the first Catholic parish to agree to participate in the ecumenical Just 10 Mission to London, which hopes to attract 10,000 people every night for a week this coming autumn.

All in all, there exists an unashamed desire to succeed in the parish without forgetting that at the heart of all this activity is the guiding help of the parish's patron, the Holy Ghost. I hope you are heartened by this tale and will remember the parish and its people in your prayers.

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