

Religion Is Still a Thing

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There was encouraging news about religious practice earlier this year. In the United Kingdom, the Bible Society reported that ‘Gen Z leads an exciting turnaround in church attendance.’ The report, based on surveys by YouGov, found that young adults are leading ‘a quiet revival’ in Sunday worship. Whereas in 2018 just 4% of those aged 18–24 were attending a Sunday liturgy at least once a month, by 2024 that percentage had risen to 16%. Young men make up the greater part of the revival, and, among the Christian denominations, the Catholic Church in Britain has seen the most significant increase.

In France, at this year’s Easter Vigil, some 10,384 adult catechumens celebrated their baptism. That’s a 45% increase from the 2024 figures, and the largest number of adult baptisms at the Easter Vigil since the French Bishops’ Conference began to compile that statistic twenty years ago. Again, it is the 18–25 demographic that makes up the greatest share of the growth, at 42% of the entire number. Those young, newly baptised Catholics are mostly comprised of students and young professionals.

What drew them to Church membership? Perhaps it was their disil-

lusion with secularity. Perhaps their mental space had become saturated, to the point of exhaustion, with social media feeds. Perhaps, one day, they visited an empty church and discovered a quiet mystery that struck a chord. Perhaps they had grown to admire the social teachings of the Church, its promotion of the ecological agenda and its defence of human life in all its stages.

To my mind there are two key reasons why Church membership is showing an uptick in some countries: an attraction to the Christian way of life and the particular emphasis the Catholic Church places on in-person community.

Belonging to a community of faith involves accepting the discipline of a certain way of life, or at least a desire to do so. The monks and nuns who become members of monastic communities present an advanced form of this point. They close the door on the outside world, with its unbridled choices, only to find an inner freedom by adhering to a time-honoured tradition of prayer and work (*ora et labora*) in a single place. Young people are turning to the Catholic Church again because they find in it a reservoir of wisdom and stability within which



they can experience God.

In the past, the Church over-emphasised the rules of religious practice and made them an end in themselves. To paraphrase the Gospel, we tied up heavy burdens and put them on people's shoulders, rarely offering a helping hand (Mt 23:4). If religion is primarily seen as a burden, then a person's adherence to the faith will carry far less resolution. If, on the other hand, religious practice is viewed as the gateway to a more fulfilling life, it will flourish.

The first Christians described their religion as a fellowship (*koinonia*) with the Lord (especially in the Eucharist) and with one another in prayer and good works (Acts 2:42–44). For them it possessed a strong social dimension. Even hermits, like Anthony of

Egypt (died 356) or Kevin of Glendalough (died 618), who sought the Lord alone in the wilderness, soon found themselves accompanied by others.

Fellowship is the most valuable gift that the Church can give to the world today. Notwithstanding the many possibilities for connecting with others via social media, people yearn for real-life connections, the kind the Church can offer. This is especially true for Gen Z, who have reported issues around isolation and anxiety. Most young adults today, along with their parents, profess to be 'spiritual but not religious', that is believing in God but not actively practising their faith. Still, they may look to their peers who have found a spiritual home with the Church and wonder if religion is still a thing.