The global church in an English village

The Londoners who come to Aylesford as pilgrims are an impressively polychrome microcosm of Christianity.

by Philip Jenkins in the January 13, 2021 issue

(Darren Glanville, Creative Commons)

I once suggested that if the Roman Catholic Church ever chose a single motto, an excellent candidate might be *Iter semper* (always traveling). That is particularly true today, when the church in Europe is passing through so many crises and yet is being constantly revived and strengthened by new arrivals.

As one representative illustration, look at the popular English pilgrimage site of Aylesford, in Kent. There, in 1240, English Christians imported the Carmelite tradition from the Holy Land and established a house in that order. Aylesford was, in a sense, an immigrant foundation. An early prior was Simon Stock, who became a venerated saint. After centuries of secular use, the house once again became a pilgrimage destination in the 1950s, at first on a limited scale. The real explosion came at the end of the century, when Aylesford started attracting crowds drawn

chiefly from newer ethnic and immigrant groups from the Greater London area.

During one of the many pilgrimages in any given year, Aylesford looks like an impressively polychrome microcosm of the universal church. Among the many specialized events held in 2020 were gatherings intended for Indians (with separate days set aside for Tamils, Goans, and Keralans), as well as Nigerians, Brazilians, Italians, Portuguese, and Poles. A generic Caribbean event is one of the most popular. The faithful can incorporate several historic shrines in a substantial walk through Kent, the Augustine Camino, named for the celebrated Spanish route to Santiago.

Similar events can be found at many other shrines devoted to the Virgin Mary, notably Walsingham in Norfolk, the British center for Catholics and Anglicans alike. There, too, the Caribbean event is a centerpiece of the Catholic ritual year, but flags and banners at other gatherings typically represent Sri Lanka, India, the Philippines, Vietnam, Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, Congo, Zimbabwe, Lithuania, Ireland, Brazil, and Trinidad. We will also find many smaller units, like a Punjabi Rosary group. The priest celebrating at a given event might well be African, often Nigerian.

There was a time when such newer ethnic groups might have been seen as an exotic or marginal addition to an English or Irish mainstream, but no longer. In recent times, Christian churches of all kinds have contracted very sharply in Britain, and the Church of England in particular has suffered badly. In theory, Anglicans far exceed Catholics as a share of the population, but for decades now, the number of Catholics actually attending services has comfortably exceeded the number of Anglicans.

In general, Catholic levels of participation have declined over time, as measured by priestly vocations as well as regular church attendance, and waves of scandals have clearly had an impact. But the steep decline among ethnically English and Irish believers has been more than compensated for by the enthusiasm of newer populations. In 2008, Eastern Europeans (mainly Poles) made up almost 10 percent of British Catholics, more than twice the number of those with Irish backgrounds. People from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean accounted for a further 11 percent.

Although those immigrant groups were still a minority of the faithful, they preserved older habits of devotion and participation, which made them a strong and visible

component of urban Catholic churches. Many parishes that had been facing crisis or even closure revived heartily when they began offering services in Polish, Portuguese, or one of the South Asian languages. The main problem the churches faced a few years ago was how to deal with the ethnic or immigrant congregations spilling over into the streets. Beyond ethnicity, the immigrants were usually visible by their relative youth. Elderly Irish women sat next to young adult South Indians or Ghanaians.

I have been using the past tense here, as matters are now in such flux. Whatever we may think of the economic effects of Britain's decision to leave the European Union—and I could write about Brexit at apocalyptic length—the ethnic and religious consequences are dire. Just since 2016, the country's Polish population has fallen from almost a million to under 700,000, and it continues to plunge. Expect dramatic falls in figures for Catholic attendance and participation.

To varying degrees, the British conditions I am describing here can be found in many Western countries, including the United States. Traditionally Catholic countries like France and Italy draw heavily on Global South nations for their priests, and Nigerian and Vietnamese candidates are much in evidence in seminaries. Anywhere in urban Western Europe, it is instructive to observe the languages in which mass is offered in churches on any given day, with frequent choices being Polish, Tamil, Vietnamese, Tagalog, and English. The last is chiefly intended for the convenience of Anglophone Africans.

Without that global reality, Catholicism in the West would be a much slighter and more troubled phenomenon than it already is.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The church in motion."