

The Quest for Tangible Religion

– a view from the pews

Salvador Ryan

There has been much discussion in the past few years surrounding the decline in religious practice in Ireland. Poll after poll reveals ever-decreasing percentages of worshippers who regularly attend church services. Instead of lamenting the fact that a certain percentage of the population have chosen to opt out of joining a congregation weekly for communal worship, I actually marvel at the numbers that continuously choose to do so. Why do they come? What motivates them to turn up at religious services where the preaching may sometimes range from mediocre to dreadful, where music may be non-existent or, if it features at all, may be sub-standard or, indeed, cringe-inducing? One can understand congregations regularly attending churches where a talented and gifted clergy minister, ensuring that they ‘get their money’s worth’, so to speak. At the very least, if the homily is thought-provoking or the singing uplifting, it becomes less difficult to understand why one might like to return to savour the experience anew. However, the reality is simply that not all parishes are blessed with good liturgy. What fills, or even half-fills, a church on a Sunday morning in these parishes? Is it simply a profound appreciation of what, for example, the Mass is about, a deep-seated realization that the sacraments work on the basis of *ex opere operato* and, regardless of the personal character of the celebrant, are effective when performed in the correct manner? Is it custom, perhaps – a social ritual by which practice one can feel justified? Does it comprise a weekly dalliance with the divine – the one with which we have become accustomed – and, like an old slipper, ‘just feels right’? Perhaps, less cynically, it consists of the working out of a faith that, while often unsure and stumbling, leads one into the presence of God and humanity. The reasons for attending communal worship are probably as many as the people who attend. Twenty-first century religion (in the tradition of the many centuries that preceded it) is anything but easy

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to pin down. What follows here are some observations on religious practice from the world of both those who occupy the pews and also those individuals who choose to remain outside while fondly retaining some of the practices of the organized religion they shy away from.

EXPLORING FLUCTUATING ATTENDANCE

Those who regularly attend church cannot but be aware of various times of the year when significant increases in attendance can be discerned. Christmas, Easter and exam time are obvious examples. Parish missions or novenas, when organized, can draw inordinately large crowds. However, there are other occasions too that are, perhaps, not as obvious. The Feast of St Blaise (3 February) and its accompanying 'blessing of the throats' annually succeeds in attracting large numbers of people, many carrying their children in their arms, into the church to hear the words 'Through the intercession of St Blaise, bishop and martyr, may God deliver you from all ailments of the throat and every other evil ...'. The distribution of ashes on Ash Wednesday also succeeds in 'capturing' the public religious imagination. In the past couple of years I have witnessed a daily Mass attendance of roughly twenty people surge to over two hundred on this first day of the season of Lent. Such a seismic shift on what could be termed the 'religious Richter scale' could never be ignored in the world of science. Careful monitoring of religious practice necessitates that the cause of this irregularity be explored. Could it really be that the moment of the imprinting of the Sign of the Cross with ashes on a person's forehead, accompanied by the words 'Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel', appeals to the extent of drawing hugely inflated crowds to the eucharistic liturgy within which the symbolic action is commonly performed? After all, could one not argue that a congregation is repeatedly invited each week, through the medium of the Word of God and the homilist's subsequent suggestions as to its application to 'turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel'? What makes the liturgy of Ash Wednesday any different? The answer, it appears to me, lies in the manner in which the invitation is given. While a homilist's arguments, and even the eloquence of Christ's teaching in scripture, may be convincing, they both lie at the level of intellectual persuasion, in the broadest meaning of the term. The invitation offered on Ash Wednesday, however, is not just simple: it's tangible. One has not only been invited. One has the mark to prove it. It can be felt. It will not be easy to dismiss the event from one's mind. It is to the effectiveness and appeal of tangible signs such as these in the living out of religion that I now wish to turn.

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TOUCHING THE FACE OF GOD

It has become quite common today for Church authorities to view with suspicion those who attach what is often perceived as an inordinate importance to what is material in their religious lives. After all, one of the great criticisms of the pre-Reformation Church was the manner in which it was supposed to have honoured the bones of St Paul in a reliquary rather than the mind of St Paul in his writings. And yet, despite the fact that the gospels invite people to turn away from sin weekly, it is the slightly wet reminder of this in the form of ashes on the first day of Lent that clearly matters to the inflated numbers that throng churches to be reminded. Does it come down to the power of a good symbol? After all, the older wording reminded vividly: 'Remember man, thou art dust and to dust thou shalt return.' On the other hand, the eucharistic liturgy is full of symbolism and yet is ignored by many. Surely the symbolism of the Ash Wednesday invitation is copper-fastened by its tangibility. The power of touch has huge appeal. Older generations will remember their contemporaries giving each statue in the church an affectionate rub before leaving the building after Mass. A lingering rub was often reserved for one's favourite saint or, perhaps, for the Virgin Mary. Regular visitors to Knock Shrine will observe pilgrims touching and even stroking a section of the gable wall where the Virgin Mary is reported to have appeared. It is very easy to dismiss actions such as these as the stuff of popular piety, often regarded as uneducated, medieval and even downright superstitious. Such a dismissal fails to appreciate the incarnational nature of Christianity. Being embodied spirits, it is necessary for us to approach God in the 'bits and pieces' of everyday life and those bits and pieces belong to a material world, a world into which Christ fully entered. Although we are encouraged to raise our hearts and minds to God in prayer we cannot do so outside of our human bodily condition. Our engagement with God in prayer cannot be divorced from the sights, sounds and smells around us. Our posture too is a bodily one and has a bearing on our relationship with God. Similarly, what we touch or what touches us becomes an important part of religious experience. Can one separate, for instance, the feel of holy water on our foreheads and our petition for well-being and protection? For many people, the smell of the incense at evening Benediction and the haunting melodies of Gregorian chant cannot be considered merely as appendages to their childhood religious experience. These elements were, indeed, integral to liturgical life and continue to assist older worshippers in recalling their youthful devotion.

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OFFICIAL APPEALS TO THE SENSES

While controversy continues regarding the place of some material things in a life of faith, it is well to remember that the official Church (which often likes to distance itself from the fringe practices of popular devotion) uses what is material at the very heart of its sacramental and liturgical life – water for baptism, fire at the Easter Vigil to illustrate the triumph of darkness over light, order over chaos and the New Creation over the Old, a fire that is reminiscent of the creation of light at the very beginning. Darkness is used, in an appeal to the senses, to describe what went before (nothingness before the creation of light and the darkness of sin before Christ's work of Redemption). This appeal to the senses of the congregation (the deprivation of light) is the closest the Church can get to the illustration it seeks. After all, how else can one begin to portray nothingness? The oils of anointing are used at Ordination and in the Sacrament of the Sick. Christ comes to us in the Eucharist under the guise of bread and wine. What is material is necessary to speak to humanity whose very existence is based on matter. Is it any wonder, then, that what is tangible in Christianity continues to have such an appeal? It could be argued that Christ understood the importance of the use of touch and matter in his own healing ministry when he chose to cure a deaf man by placing his fingers in his ear and touching his tongue with spittle while pronouncing the instruction *Ephphatha* (Mark 7:33-34). Similarly, in the case of a man born blind, he chooses to heal by using a paste made of spittle and an instruction to wash at the pool of Siloam (John 9:6-7). The use of material in Christ's ministry does not obstruct or take from his teaching. Instead, it reinforces it and imprints the encounter on the memory of those who are ministered to. Touch is effective. Theological purists may argue that rubbing a wooden statue in a church is tantamount to idolatry – the investing of supernatural power in something that is purely material. In what sense does an elderly devotee 'touch' the Sacred Heart or the Madonna and Child when he or she places a hand on the base of the statue? Furthermore, to what extent does the devotee believe that it is Christ or the Virgin that is being caressed? Harsh condemnations of such practices could veritably likewise condemn the actions of the woman who suffered from a haemorrhage in the gospels and who decided, in faith, to reach out and touch the fringe of Christ's cloak. Luke records Christ's reaction to her touch as follows: 'Who was it that touched me?' (Luke 8:45). While the material that was touched was literally just that – material (the fringe of a cloak), yet the action itself 'touched' the person of Christ himself in a far more significant way. What is tangible can never be relegated to the sidelines of spirituality. God

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speaks through the very ordinary bits and pieces of the material world that he created and our response, in turn, often employs the same channels of communication. In effect, our learning journey in the spiritual life often resembles that followed in our pre-school days. Like young children who play with different shaped wooden blocks and attempt to fit them into their proper places, we, in turn, initially 'feel' our way towards God, frequently ignorant of the concepts behind what we touch, feel, taste and smell. After all, our first initiation into the Church begins with the pouring of water on our infant heads. This need for a continuing contact with 'tangible religion' continues throughout our lives. The words of the priest as heard in the confessional, 'I absolve you ...', provides a heavenly assurance, enunciated with human lips, that we have been freed from our sin, an assurance that is not so much required by God as by ourselves, a confirmation that can be humanly *heard*. The gift of the Holy Spirit received at Confirmation can be felt on our brows. Being human, theology and the tangible become complementary bedfellows.

TANGIBLE RELIGION POPULARLY ENDORSED

Given the emphasis placed upon tangibility in both the scriptures and liturgical practice, it is curious that many fail to recognize its continued appeal to devoted men and women. Yet there are myriad indications that tangible religion impresses upon people in a unique and hugely rewarding manner, both churchgoers and private practitioners alike. I marvel each year at the number of young people who decide to give up drink for November. Many are not churchgoers and most are not aware of the background to the custom (i.e. doing some penance for the sake of the souls in Purgatory during a month which commemorates the dead in a special way). And yet they choose to take it upon themselves to abstain from alcohol. Similar efforts are made by large groups of people at Lent, practising Christians and agnostics alike. The idea is obviously appealing and considered to be of value. This, too, can be located in the broad ambit of tangible religion, even if many no longer view it as a religious action. Fasting and sacrifice are tangible realities. One feels the lack of what one has chosen to forego. Pilgrimage to sites such as Lough Derg spring from a similar desire for tangible religion. Many who choose to deprive themselves of sleep and food for the duration of their stay are not necessarily churchgoers. Yet the idea of doing so appeals to them. It is religion that one can feel in one's bones. Some weeks ago, I spoke with a friend who has opted out of regular attendance at church for some time. She told me, however, that she intended to go to the Celebration of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday. When

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I enquired as to her reasons, she replied, 'I always liked the Holy Week ceremonies. I don't know why ...' There is, of course, an element of variety about the ceremonies in Holy Week, a break from the perceived hum-drum of weekly Mass. However, the appeal of the Passion ceremony in particular, may also lie in its striking symbolism which climaxes in tangible action - the starkness of the liturgical setting, the prostration of the celebrant before the cross at the beginning of the ceremony and, of course, the practice of filing up the church to bend down and kiss an image of the wounded Christ. This action, performed by the faithful in attendance, is a perfect example of bodily prayer - a gesture is certainly worth a thousand words. If you don't believe me, have a look at the character of Rodrigo Mendoza played by Robert De Niro in the film *The Mission* (1986). A former slave trader and murderer of his own brother, Mendoza confesses to the Jesuit Father Gabriel (Jeremy Irons) and is pardoned but yet cannot forgive himself. Agreeing to undertake a harsh penance, he is strapped to a heavy load of his former weapons, which he must drag through the tortuous terrain of the South American rainforests to the Jesuit mission where he is to stay. When he has completed a large part of the journey and reaching the top of a dangerous cliff face, the load slips from his shoulders and plummets to the bottom of a ravine. His Jesuit travelling companions signal that he has done enough, yet Mendoza himself is not yet satisfied. He duly clammers down the rocky precipice to collect his burden and proceeds to carry it to the end of the journey, after which the native peoples, whom he had once trapped and sold into slavery, appropriately cut the ropes with which he and his sin-burden were attached. Mendoza's self-assumed penitential journey vividly highlights the nature of tangible religion. There was no use in prescribing verbal prayer as a penance for a man like Mendoza. In order to be convinced of God's forgiveness, this man needed to drink deeply of the physical pain he had inflicted on others. Mendoza's fall into sin may have been tangible but so also was his redemption.

INTEGRATING TANGIBLE RELIGION

The need to reach out and feel one's way to salvation is a profoundly human one. The carrying of rosary beads in one's pocket for reassurance, the wearing of a Miraculous Medal or some other sacramental, the lighting of a blessed candle in a bedroom - these all belong to the same desire for tangible channels to the divine. They fulfil the human need to reach out and grasp God, just as the woman in the gospel clutched at Christ's garment. Such desires should not be denigrated or ridiculed. They are, and rightly should

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be, incorporated into the life of the Church in a fitting manner. Unfortunately, however, the importance of appealing to the senses within the liturgy is frequently overlooked in an effort to achieve a sort of pure worship without the earthly clutter! The dimming of lights to create atmosphere, the lighting of candles, the introduction of soft music are often viewed as belonging more to the world of gimmicks than organized religion. And yet we, as worshippers, are embodied spirits, with all that entails. What's more, one cannot help notice that places of worship where both the body and spirit are facilitated in this way reap the rewards in the numbers they attract. It saddens and frustrates me to watch some priests, when substituting the blessing and sprinkling of water for the Penitential Rite, stand within the sanctuary area and sprinkle the newly-blessed water some two feet in front of them, reluctant, even in small churches, to make the short journey down the aisle to bless the congregation in a fully tangible way. And yet what is tangible is hugely effective. What a wasted opportunity and, more seriously, what a conflicting message! If we preach a bountiful and munificent God who multiplies loaves and fish, turns barrel-fuls of water into wine and entices half the population of fish in the sea to surrender to the apostles' nets, how can we reconcile with this image his minister's preference for tenuously sprinkling a carpet rather than blessing a full congregation? With such an approach, it is no wonder that crowds flock to the church on Ash Wednesday, happy in the assurance that at least an impression of ashes will be made on each individual forehead!

CONCLUSION

Tangible religion is not superficial religion. Neither is it superstitious religion. It is not anti-intellectual and it does not simply bow before the altar of 'what feels good'. It has its roots in the very heart of Christianity – in the ministry of Christ who appreciated the very physical expression of contrition exhibited in the kisses a woman poured upon him between the dripping of tears on to his feet, the drying of his feet with her hair and the anointing of them with precious ointment (Luke 7:36-50). In this instance, actions spoke louder than words and Christ praised the woman's faith. Not much has changed in the meantime. In ministering to others and in being ministered to ourselves, it is wise to remember that we are human and our journey to God is both physical and spiritual and that these two categories are not mutually exclusive but are, indeed, complementary. Such an embodied faith is not only healthy but will inevitably have a wide appeal as is attested to by the many who have chosen to vote for the tangible from the sidelines.