

Many reasons, one desire

Parishes all over the world will be welcoming new members at the Easter Vigil. But what draws people to the Catholic Church and what problems do they face in embracing a new faith? Experienced catechists provide some interesting answers

For Catholic parishes the Easter Vigil marks the climax of months of preparation for men and women wishing to join the Church. The service will be an emotional moment for the groups of catechumens (unbaptised people converting to Catholicism) and candidates (baptised Christians becoming Catholics) who have spent months in each other's company preparing for their reception.

It is also a great celebration for the catechists and sponsors who have accompanied them along the way, and a chance for parishes to welcome their newest members on the most important date in the liturgical calendar.

According to the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA), the instruction given to catechumens should be a gradual process – “several years if necessary” – to ensure that the conversion and faith of the catechumens is strong enough to survive. In practice many parishes run a much shorter programme, with most preferring to start the RCIA course in the autumn and work towards the acceptance of new members at the Easter Vigil. However, joining the course remains a serious undertaking, with groups meeting once a week for up to six months in preparation for what should be a lifelong commitment.

Would-be Catholics are drawn into the Church for many different reasons, with catechists finding that the most commonly cited factor is the influence of a Catholic spouse. Sometimes, however, the effect of a particularly



Catechists and members of the RCIA course due to be received at Ealing Abbey, west London, at Easter

traumatic episode makes people reassess their lives, while others are attracted by the community of the parish. Some are simply looking for something that they cannot yet identify or articulate clearly.

According to those involved in running RCIA courses, joining is unlikely to be the first time enquirers have stepped inside a church. Bishop Kieran Conry, from the Bishops' Conference's Department of Evangelisation and Catechesis, said the catechumenate was the “final part of the process” in a journey that may have begun years beforehand, adding:

“There is anecdotal evidence that people who have reached this stage have already been coming to church for an average of five years.”

Veronica Robbins, a catechist for more than 25 years, and RCIA coordinator for the parish of Christ the Prince of Peace in Weybridge, Surrey, agreed. While she finds many enquirers have Catholic spouses and children, there are other routes to the Church: “Some people may have started with the Alpha Course in a Church of England or Baptist church and found they wanted something else and approached the Catholic Church. Other people have had a shock in their life, a trauma of some sort or have lost someone dear to them.”

Anne Dixon, a catechist at St William of York Church in the Archdiocese of Southwark, agreed that the journey to faith rarely started on the first day of the RCIA course: “It could have started 10 or 20 years previously with someone they met who had an effect on them. One of the things we ask them when they first come is ‘How did you find us?’ One person came along to hear his friend singing in the choir and was first catechised through the music.”

Other catechists reported candidates saying they simply felt “comfortable” or “at home” when they entered church for the first time. One man felt drawn to the Catholic Church through his work as an undertaker. He had reportedly been impressed by the Church's response to death.

“People are searching for something even

The catechists' tales

“I had one young man who said he found us in the Yellow Pages. He determined that the Catholic faith was the one for him and just looked up his nearest church.” (*Anne Dixon, catechist at St William of York Church in the Archdiocese of Southwark*)

“We had one woman from the Far East who turned to Father and said, ‘Who is this God you keep talking about?’” (*Sabina O'Sullivan, coordinator of the RCIA course at Our Lady of Compassion Church in Upton Park in the Brentwood Diocese*)

“An 85-year-old was baptised this year. She

started coming to church for coffee mornings, got to know Catholics and became interested in becoming one herself ... I remember a long time ago having a huge group talking about Mary, and a young woman asked, ‘Who is Mary?’” (*Veronica Robbins, RCIA coordinator for the parish of Christ the Prince of Peace in Weybridge, Surrey*)

“Prisoners often find their way to us as a Church too: at the moment I have one preparing for reception in one of the prisons I work in. It's entirely different from a parish RCIA programme.” (*Zillah Martin, RCIA coordinator, Diocese of Plymouth*)

if they're not sure what it is. The course helps them to clear their mind. Some people come to us knowing exactly what they want to do and others are an open book," said Denise Mason, RCIA coordinator at St Wilfrid's in Ripon, in the Diocese of Leeds. "Some profess to be Christian but have little or no knowledge of the Bible or can't remember. But it's not just a matter of loading them with facts, what we are really saying is that the process they are going through will enrich their lives through a deeper relationship with God."

Occasionally, those attending RCIA have resistance to overcome at home. Zillah Martin is an RCIA coordinator in the Diocese of Plymouth. Every year she's run an RCIA course she has encountered people under pressure from family who do not want them to become Catholics: "We currently have someone in the parish who was received last year, and whose spouse still makes it difficult for him to get to Mass on Sunday. So far he has, but he finds it a struggle."

The Second Vatican Council mandated for a return of the adult catechumenate, used in the early Church and by White Father missionaries in North Africa, whereby those wishing to enter the Church are gradually brought into "the community of the faithful". The RCIA course was specifically designed for the initiation of unbaptised people but Christians and non-Christians alike follow the same course. Candidates and catechumens range in age and background, and sometimes have a very limited understanding of Christianity when they start the course.

"The strength of RCIA is in its flexibility," said Bishop Conry. "It's different from the Alpha course for example, it's less prescriptive, less structured. It can be tailored to the local needs of each group."

What all the catechists share is a sense of the enormous privilege of working with people as they explore ideas for the first time, as expressed by Anne Dixon: "What's amazing for established Catholics is you can get stale and take it all for granted, but when someone comes along to the RCIA who is new to it all, the enthusiasm is overwhelming. They renew everyone's faith."

After the euphoria of the Easter celebrations, the more reflective period of mystagogy or postbaptismal catechesis is designed to help integrate the new parishioners more fully into the life of the Church. "We try and include them and make sure there is something they can latch on to, but many say they feel it's too early to become a reader or eucharistic minister. It's a lot to take in and assimilate," said Denise Mason.

The groups will meet up two or three times after Easter to talk about their experiences before a final Mass at Pentecost, often held in the diocesan cathedral and led by the Bishop. "The public witness of the parish, the priest and parishioners is most important if people are to come back. A lively, welcoming, warm parish will always get more candidates," said Bishop Conry.

TIM HAMES

'The present comes with a high price tag that the past has imposed on it'



What is the difference between literal imperialism and liberal internationalism? This is the question that appears to be haunting British foreign policy. The Iranian hostage crisis fits a much wider pattern.

Almost 40 years after the Wilson Government announced the end of this country's military role "east of Suez", there is a more significant physical and political British presence in that region today than in the late 1960s. British forces are engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan and have been facing tension with Iran, there is a close security relationship with many of the Gulf states which emerged in the aftermath of Britain's decision to "leave" the area four decades ago and Tony Blair maintains the desire to be involved in the Middle East peace process.

Yet the present comes with a high price tag that the past has imposed on it. While Tony Blair and his most likely successor, Gordon Brown, perceive Britain's involvement in this part of the world as a largely selfless exercise, one motivated by the ideals of liberal internationalism – the active promotion of positive and universal values – what might be described as historical debris can intervene to undercut well-intentioned intervention.

For the reality is that the history of British involvement in the Middle East is almost forgotten in this country now but certainly is not by people there. I once had a chat with a Foreign Office minister who recounted how he had recently heard a tribal elder in Afghanistan describe Victorian era battles between British forces and his forefathers as if they had taken place "last Thursday".

Few modern citizens here appreciate that Britain was a major player in Baghdad and Basra in the 1920s, but the troops who arrived in Iraq in 2003 were bemused to discover that initial impressions of them had been predetermined by that experience. The waters in which the 15 British servicemen were seized have been disputed for centuries, a treaty signed between the Ottoman empire and the Persian

empire in 1639 having failed to resolve the situation satisfactorily. Guess which country was intimately involved in seeking a new resolution to this disagreement from 1913 until the onset of the First World War led those efforts to be suspended? In Israel and Palestine, too, Britain finds itself damned by one side for its callous attitude towards Jewish emigration in the 1930s and 1940s and denounced by the other for the 1917 Balfour Declaration.

Call it the curse of post-colonialism. It is certainly not a blessing for British leaders. It can apply in Africa, too, where the Blair-Brown effort to increase international development aid is mostly appreciated, yet efforts to promote democratic institutions and instincts are frequently dismissed as interference.

These were not problems that ministers were concerned about in the 1970s, mostly because the rapidly diminishing influence which an economically wounded nation was enduring made such a prominent position implausible. The notion then that we would be a major player in global affairs again would have been treated as lunatic.

So is it lunatic today? I think not but I appreciate that many others will differ. If there is any consolation in the curse of post-colonialism, it is that the British are not unique in being burdened by it. It applies to the French, too, and others who once had links overseas (Belgium and the Netherlands, Germany and Italy) have been so embarrassed either by what occurred then or the legacy of the Second World War that they have entirely withdrawn from this territory. The Americans are perhaps in the worst place of the lot, regularly assailed as behaving in an imperialist fashion despite the fact that they never had colonies or an empire in the Middle East in the first place and spent the 1950s aspiring to oblige Britain and France to relinquish their terrain there.

This may be the central foreign policy dilemma of the next 20 years. If internationalism is to be more than the provision of humanitarian supplies, then the past will need to be recognised for what it is but not be allowed to become a ball-and-chain. That requires modesty on all sides. We cannot afford the words and the approach of the French Prime Minister Alexandre Millerand, who sent his army into Damascus to occupy that city in July 1920 with the cry: "The whole of it, and forever!"

■ Tim Hames writes for *The Times*.