

RESEARCH / Survey reveals uncertain future for communal liturgies

Post-Covid ambivalence about returning to church buildings

LIZ DODD

A SURVEY of almost 2,500 Catholics has provided an unparalleled snapshot of the UK Church during lockdown, and reveals that, when church buildings were closed, parishes provided community support, prayer, and food and medicine deliveries to the most vulnerable.

The survey, conducted for Catholic Voices between 19 May and 26 July, found broad support among lay people and clergy for the bishops' conferences' actions during the pandemic, including its decision to close church buildings, a move that sparked controversy among some groups at the time.

According to the research, undertaken by Professor Francis Davis of the Universities of Birmingham and Oxford, Professor Andrew Village of York St John and Professor Leslie Francis of the University of Warwick, 61 per cent of respondents agreed that closing church buildings was the right thing to do.

Just 22 per cent felt the Church had gone too far in this regard, and only a quarter of respondents – 26 per cent – thought that



churches should stay open “whatever the crisis”.

Local churches provided a large amount of community backing, with most of the parishes surveyed providing some kind of practical support like prayer or deliveries. “Supporting the vulnerable seemed to have been the main tasks for parishes on some or most days,” the report said.

According to clergy respondents, almost three-quarters of churches delivered food on most or some days, and 58 per cent delivered medicines. Nearly all the clergy – 96 per cent – said they prayed for other people most or some days, and 95 per cent spent time supporting the elderly or lonely, the sick (91 per cent) and the bereaved (94 per cent).

The research paints an uncertain future for communal liturgies in the UK, with just 61 per cent of respondents saying they intended to revert back to physical services. While 4 per cent said they intended to worship online for the foreseeable future, questions about Catholic attitudes towards church buildings reveal a shift. Less than half – 49 per cent – of people said they felt they needed a church building to fully express their faith, and only 34 per cent worried that people would lose faith without church buildings in which to gather for worship.

A huge proportion of Catholics used online liturgies – although researchers point out that the survey was conducted online, which would weight responses. Catholics tended to choose services outside their own parishes: 68 per cent watched services from a Catholic church other than their usual parish, compared to 46 per cent of Anglicans. Other popular liturgies included services from the Vatican, L’Arche and Taizé communities.

While support for the national Churches’ actions was high, priests said they received the majority of support from their congregations and not from the hierarchy.

POVERTY

Charities warn of homelessness crisis for youth

YOUTH homelessness is at the forefront of a significant rise in the number of people experiencing rough sleeping and other forms of homelessness, Catholic charities have warned, writes Ellen Teague.

“If you care about homelessness, youth homelessness should be at the top of your agenda,” George O’Neill, chief executive of the Cardinal Hume Centre, told *The Tablet*. London rough sleeping figures showed a significant increase in numbers of young people in the first three months of the lockdown, he warned. This should be a priority, “not only because it is a tragic threat to the potential found in every young person, but because there is so much evidence to show that too often homelessness at a young age is repeated in later life. We feel we are seeing more examples of relationship and family breakdown, leaving young people without a home. We need a coordinated and preventative response that takes account of young people’s needs and their routes into homelessness.”

Depaul UK chief executive Mike Thiedke warned that the economic downturn could see a further increase in homelessness. “The number of people sleeping rough in London in quarter two of 2020 was 33 per cent higher than in the same period in 2019 and the outlook for the next six months is bleak.”

Depaul UK has continued to run supported accommodation services around the country during the pandemic, including three hotels for street homeless people.

He said that keeping the Nightstop emergency accommodation network running was challenging because a shortage of volunteer hosts, due to the pandemic, led to a two-thirds drop in the number of beds for a night that Depaul could provide.

This week, the St Vincent de Paul Society reported that it is seeing a rise in poverty in the communities in which it works. Chief executive officer Elizabeth Palmer said: “The financial, emotional and health fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic has dragged many thousands of

Choir school row created ‘toxic atmosphere’, former administrator alleges

WESTMINSTER Cathedral’s music administrator, Madeline Smith, has stepped down, citing a row over the future of the choir school in her resignation letter, writes Liz Dodd.

In the letter, which was circulated by the journalist Ysenda Maxtone Graham, Ms Smith describes the music department’s position as “untenable”, alleging a lack of support from the cathedral hierarchy and the choir school.

She said that the recent decision to move the school to weekly boarding, contributed to the

choir’s “slow decline”, and that the choir lost three choristers during lockdown and was now “in a worrying state”.

“I thus reluctantly leave this wonderful and unique place with an extremely heavy heart, and no small amount of depression and anxiety, caused by the frightening and toxic atmosphere upheld by the management of the school and tacitly enabled by the cathedral hierarchy through its refusal to recognise the problem, intervene and mediate to find a workable solution between its employees” she wrote.

A spokesperson for the Diocese of Westminster said: “This letter, circulated by a former employee, is replete with inaccurate and baseless claims, which are personal attacks on certain individuals. It would appear that this employee is acting from a personal grudge.

“Westminster Cathedral Choir School and Westminster Cathedral, with its music department, are working closely together on the challenges of these difficult Covid-19 circumstances to secure the future of sacred