

All Is, Perhaps, Not Yet Lost: A View from the Pews in France That Might Be Surprising To Some

It is fashionable in some circles to declare that the church in Western Europe – particularly in places like France – is dead.

But this little article by one Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry, which appeared a year and a half ago (January 15 2015) but only came to my notice much more recently, suggests that such pontificating might be just a little premature.

<http://theweek.com/articles/531469/there-christianrevival-starting-france>

“Is There a Christian Revival Starting in France?”

‘On a recent Sunday, my family and I only showed up 10 minutes early for Mass.

‘That meant we had to sit in fold-out chairs in the spillover room, where the Mass is relayed on a large TV screen. During the service, my toddler (*nota bene: this French Catholic writer is a young parent with at least one child; not all French infidels have stopped having children – CM*) had to go to the bathroom. To get there, we had to step over a dozen people sitting in hallways and corners.

‘This is business as usual for my church in Paris, France.

‘I point this out because one of the most familiar tropes in social commentary today is the loss of Christian faith in Europe in general, and France in particular.

'The Wall Street Journal recently fretted about the sale of "Europe's empty churches".

'Could it be, instead, that France is in the early stages of a Christian revival?

'Yes, churches in the French countryside are desperately empty. **There are no young people there.**

'But then, there are no young people in the French countryside, period.

'France is a modern country with an advanced economy, and that means its countryside has emptied, and that means that churches built in an era when the country's sociological makeup was quite different go empty.

'In the cities – which is where people are, and where cultural trends gain escape velocity – the story is quite different.

'But, back to our parish. Is our pastor some outlier with megawatt charisma? In terms of flair, he would win no public speaking contests.

'But there is something that sets him apart from many of the Catholic priests my parents' generation grew up listening to: he is unapologetically orthodox.

'He is tactful, but unafraid to talk about controversial topics.

It would be interesting to know how many of these new orthodox priests in France are beginning to speak, quietly, but critically, in-house, behind closed doors, about Islam. – CM

He will talk about a lackadaisical approach to the liturgy being a kind of unfaithfulness to God.

'A few weeks ago, I even got to see something for the first time in my life: a Catholic priest preaching about Hell.

'But there is no rigoristic hectoring at our parish. Our pastor will stress the importance of living in accordance with the Church's rules, and in the same breath say something like: "Is the real problem in the Church people who are divorced and remarried, or people who are homosexual? No, the real problem is people who go to church every Sunday and are not willing to see everyone as a child of God, are not willing to welcome them."

'It is the kind of approach modelled by Popes John Paul II and Francis: A Catholicism that is both doctrinally robust and joyfully welcoming.

*One hopes, however, that where doctrine **is** thoroughly understood the demand that one blindly 'welcome', wholesale, into one's country, a horde of murderous rapists and thieves who regard a rapist, armed robber, slave-trader and treaty-breaker as 'the perfect man', 'an excellent example of conduct', might come to be seen as foolish and dangerous and not in any way appropriate for Christians. – CM*

'This is not an isolated phenomenon.

'My wife and I now live in an upper-crust neighbourhood with all the churches full of upwardly-mobile professionals.

'When we were penniless grad students, we lived in a working-class neighbourhood, and on Sunday our church was packed with immigrant families (these would, one assumes, be Catholic immigrants from any number of countries, including perhaps even a sprinkling of brave apostates from Islam – CM) and hipster gentrifiers.

'It was only recently that I was struck by the fact that, imperceptibly, the majority of my college and grad-school friends who were Christmas-and-Easter Catholics when we met, now report going to Church every Sunday and praying regularly.

Nota bene: they are not becoming atheists, nor are they

converting to Islam; they are... rediscovering the historic faith of France. And one wonders whether, in Reformed circles, the same phenomenon might not just possibly be taking place; the semichurched turning around and coming home, rather than drifting away altogether. – CM

'On social media they used to post about parties; now, they're equally likely to post prayers for persecuted Middle East Christians, or calls to help the homeless over the holidays.

'My friends live all over town; some of them are young singles who move around a lot; all of them report looking for those mythical "empty churches" we hear so much about – and failing to find them.

'In fact, it's closer to the other way around: If you don't show up early, you might have to sit on the floor – and people are happy to do it.

'Of course, the key benchmark for a real religious revival is priestly vocations. The test of a people's fervour is how many of them are willing to pursue a life of celibacy and thankless service for the sake of the Kingdom.

'But it's a lagging indicator: the move from finding a robust faith to joining the priesthood takes time. But even there, things are looking up.

'Vocations have stabilized for some time now, and have been showing slow but steady growth for years.

'The Community of St Martin, a congregation started in the 1970s by just one priest, whose members pray in Latin using the new post-Vatican II Missal – making them suspect to both the traditionalist wing of the Church, who distrust the New Missal, and the progressive wing, who dislike the use of Latin – now has one of the biggest seminaries in the country.

'And, so to speak, quality has a quantity of its own: one

talented priest will turn around a parish when 10 mediocre ones just occupy space.

'The people of the so-called John Paul II generation, who have been through the crucible of all those anti-religious trends we've read so much about, who choose the priesthood nonetheless, have a fervour that was too often lacking in previous generations.

'I don't deny that much of my evidence for a revival is anecdotal; but, well, first, I'm a pundit, so you're dreaming if you think I'm going to let that stop me; and second, if there *was* a revival starting, wouldn't that be how you would notice it, before it showed up in the numbers?

'The massive rallies in France, underwritten by the Catholic Church, against the recent same-sex marriage bill, stunned the world: Isn't France the poster child for sexually easy-going secularism? Perhaps more than a million people took to the streets, and disproportionately young ones, too...

'But they forgot that a century of militant secularism didn't kill the Old Faith – it merely drove it underground.

'And perhaps by privatizing faith, the secularists unwittingly strengthened it; after all, the catacombs have always been good to Christians.

The catacombs, perhaps yes. But not, historically, the Dhimma. That is an entirely different kettle of fish. One only needs to read Bat Yeor's "The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam", to see that. – CM

'Many commentators on both sides have described the protests as a kind of "conservative May '68", after the generation-defining student protests that would go on to seize the levers of politics.

'Infamously, an unwritten rule of French politics for the past

50 years has been that mass protests will kill a government bill even if it has a majority in Parliament and in the polls.

Many fret (and some relish) that the government making an exception just for social conservatives only radicalized them further.

'Nowadays, the perceptive and troublemaking French writer Michel Houellebecq is making noises with his book "Submission", which envisions France turning into an Islamic theocracy in the near future – not chiefly because of immigration from Muslim countries, but because of the conversion of the native-born population.

'The agnostic Houellebecq's book is Christ-haunted, or perhaps more accurately, Christianity-haunted.

'The book's protagonist, an allegory of France and, perhaps, of the author, is fascinated by the figure of Joris-Karl Huysmans, a 19th-century French author who converted from a life of atheistic hedonism, to devout Catholicism.

'The protagonist is exhausted by the spiritually dead consumerist secularism of his culture – so exhausted, that even despite his best efforts, he finds himself unable to believe in the faith of his forefathers, and only turns to Islam, as it were, as the last available option.

'Houellebecq's genius has always been at tapping the French zeitgeist where it hurts. The Catholic writer Barbey D'Aurevilly had been so struck by young Huysman's decadent novel "A Rebours", that he declared Hysman's options were "the barrel of a gun or the foot of the cross", suicide or Catholicism.

'Houellebecq's novel has France choosing what seems to be, from his perspective, the first option.

"Incredibly, perhaps France is instead choosing the second.

'The tragic Charlie Hebdo attack has thrown into relief what seems to some, like Michel Houellebecq, as the battle between irreligiosity and Islam for the future of France.

'Nobody seems to envision that France's future instead just might be some of that old-time religion.'

Of course, since this article was published, there have been not only additional mass murderous Muslim attacks on secular and political France – notably the massacres at the Bataclan concert hall in Paris and the massacre on the esplanade in Nice on 14th July – but, perhaps throwing into sharp focus what Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry is saying, the ritual Muslim slaughter of a Catholic priest in his own church in the heart of France, in Rouen, carried out by two allahu-akbarring Muslims (one a 'cradle Muslim', one a French convert to Islam) who interrupted the Mass. Fr Jacques Hamel's last words – addressed to his murderers or perhaps to that which enthalls them – were, reportedly, "Go away, Satan!"

One hopes that the 'signs of spring' that Mr Gobry has been seeing within church life in France may continue; that culturally-Catholic French (and perhaps not only Catholics but those of other traditions), contemplating the bloody martyrdom of Fr Hamel, will respond by defiantly and stubbornly reinhabiting the churches and rediscovering a passionate orthodoxy that will give them strength and clarity of mind, such as were manifested, inter alia, by Jean de Parisot of Valetta, the indomitable Frenchman who led the Knights of St John in the defence of Malta against a vast Turkish Muslim fleet, in 1565... and that Fr Hamel's defiant dying exclamation might be the harbinger of a physical as well as a spiritual exorcism of Mohammedanism from France. – CM