

A 2004 ARTICLE FROM THE TABLET ABOUT 'LANDINGS', OUR NEW PROGRAMME AIMING TO WELCOME CATHOLICS 'BACK HOME'

for more details see the newsletter or contact Bronagh Power 07902 607936 or Landings.Edinburgeast@gmail.com

Welcome back to the Church

PAULINE GILBERTSON

Returning to Mass after many years can be daunting. But Landings, run by lay volunteers, can help lapsed Catholics return

THINK BACK to when you went to Mass last Sunday. Were you one of the 'regulars', greeted by smiles from familiar faces on your way into church and perhaps enjoying a coffee and chat with other parishioners afterwards? Or were you one of the few who slipped in and out feeling unnoticed or unwelcomed simply because, having not been a regular Mass-attender for years, you didn't feel part of your parish community?

For many people, returning to the Church after a long absence can be a daunting, lonely experience. The issues which led them to leave may still be painfully present, or hovering beneath the surface. They may feel guilty or angry; perhaps a bereavement or divorce led them away from the Church. Or they might have drifted away because the Church no longer felt relevant to their lives, or they were bored by their experience of the liturgy. The reasons for up to 80 per cent of Catholics in Britain lapsing from regular Mass attendance are as many and varied as the reasons for some of them eventually deciding to return. And as the prodigal son found, facing the family after a long absence is not so easy. When it comes to the family of the Church, there are not only old acquaintances to face, but strangers to encounter, and perhaps the not inconsiderable hurdle of going to confession for the first time after many years. Unless people returning are befriended by others or get involved in church activities, they often feel they are not *really* part of the parish community. With that experience, it's quite likely they will drift away again.

Several programmes, founded in America, are now being developed in parishes in Britain to enable returning Catholics to find a route back to the practice of their faith as part of the Mass-going community. Their aim is to develop that all-important sense of belonging, by helping 'returners' to get to know a small group of ordinary parishioners within a safe environment in which they can talk about their life and faith without feeling they are being judged. Among the programmes is Landings,

founded in Boston by the Paulist priest, Fr Jac Campbell. The 'key', he says 'is compassionate listening'. Landings uses a system of group meetings, run by lay people, which although relaxed in atmosphere, are highly structured. The group of lay 'welcomers' plan and run the weekly meetings and offer friendship and support to returning Catholics, but 'returners' play an equal part (which avoids any sense of 'us' and 'them'). Each week members of the group take turns (as and when they feel ready) to choose and lead some prayers, tell the story of their faith journey and talk about how they perceive different aspects of Catholicism. The assumption is that the returning Catholics have already been catechized at an earlier stage, and that faith-sharing on equal terms and neutral ground is a more relevant and effective tool at this point in their lives.

It sounds simple, and simplicity is its key, but this is a method which is not suitable for volunteers who are keen to judge those who have been away, or want to point out the errors of their ways. The welcomers must be discreet and non-judgemental; their brief is to welcome and accept, to share their own faith and to listen without criticism as others do like-wise, never aspiring to change a returner to fit their perception of a 'good Catholic' and not attempting to tackle problems which need to be referred for expert help.

The weekly discussion begins with questions for reflection, but there are no correct or incorrect answers – this is a matter of sharing our faith, not passing a test. The weekly telling of someone's faith story is often moving for both storyteller and listeners, and both the preparation and telling of these stories can prove deeply cathartic.

Since Landings was founded by Campbell 15 years ago, it has been used by 100 dioceses in the United States, Canada and now Britain. It first came to Britain in 2001 when it was adopted by the parish of Ealing Abbey in west London. Since then workshops have been run by Ealing for the dioceses of Portsmouth, Southwark, Lancaster, Liverpool and Salford (with recent forays into Shrewsbury and Scotland). There is also an annual Landings workshop for other parishes at Ealing Abbey itself.

Although it is the group of lay welcomers that runs Landings, the programme cannot run without the full support of a sympathetic priest. He plays a vital role, primarily in celebrating Reconciliation and

the Eucharist at the retreat day which marks the culmination of a Landings group. He also makes himself available for one-to-one advice when required.

Campbell has found that there is sometimes an unspoken fear (especially in smaller parishes) that returning Catholics will bring a lot of extra work with them. But, he says, 'the value of programmes such as Landings is the deflection of a great deal of the work, the development of parish leaders and the influx of a remarkably enthusiastic group of returnees who bring new life to the parish'. Returning Catholics often turn out to be great evangelisers, many choosing to come back to the group as welcomers; others become involved in catechetics or other areas of parish life. Another spin-off is the powerful effect on the welcomers, many reporting being enriched and inspired by the programme.

Julia is a typical Landings returner. Her story highlights the fact that without a friendly and 'safe' small community to smooth the way, she might not have found her way back to the Catholic Church at all. 'Like many people, I drifted away from the Catholic Church in my late teens. Through my twenties and thirties I was establishing a career, relationships and home, busy with the usual responsibilities of adult life. When I gave up my career to be a full-time mum, I had more time to read, study and learn about Christianity and I felt myself gradually drawn back to Catholicism. However, when I attended an occasional Mass I knew no one and felt like a stranger. One evening a Catholic friend told me about Landings, which would shortly begin at St Edmund's Church in Southampton. Initially apprehensive, I went along to the information evening and found the organisers to be friendly, genuinely welcoming and not in the least judgemental.

Far from being criticized as a 'lapsed Catholic', I felt that the Church wanted me back and valued me. In addition to the eight group meetings, I was also able to meet privately with a priest to discuss personal issues and get advice.

The programme culminated in a day retreat and, although there was no pressure to do so, I was by then delighted to return to the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion. Without Landings it would have been much harder to come back and I might have continued to procrastinate, never quite plucking up the courage to make the commitment.'