

This article was in the Catholic Herald a couple of weeks ago. We publish it in this week's newsletter with a political disclaimer – ie it is in the newsletter because of Carol's openness about her faith rather than because of her political views!

Notebook

CAROL MONAGHAN

How my Ash Wednesday cross went viral

Wednesdays in Parliament are always hectic, with committees, Prime Minister's Questions and journalists vying for interviews. Therefore, on Ash Wednesday this year I decided to go to 8am Mass at Westminster Cathedral to ensure that I wasn't trying to squeeze my faith in during a busy day.

I met several of my colleagues at the cathedral and together we walked back to Parliament, chatting easily about Lent, Brexit and predictions for PMQs. For me, first business of the day was my 9am science and technology select committee meeting on ocean acidification, so I headed to the room, forgetting about the ash cross on my forehead.

Some media outlets suggested that I had experienced negativity from committee members. However, this could not have been further from the truth. They were curious as to the significance of the cross and appreciated the explanation I gave them. They were genuinely keen to learn something new about my faith, just as I am when I often ask Muslim, Hindu or Sikh friends about certain aspects of their faiths.

One committee member, out of simple courtesy, reminded me that the session would be broadcast. I thought no more of it as we started hearing disturbing evidence on the state of our oceans. My surprise came the next day with a phone call from the BBC, which wanted to write an article about my open display of faith.

Off the back of this, I have been inundated with messages of support. These have come from people of many faiths and from wider secular society. While most people do not share my faith, they support my right to practise it.

Freedom of religious beliefs and practices is an important part of our democracy. Forcing anyone to hide their faith is, I believe, a form of intolerance. My Christianity teaches me to respect those of other beliefs, and I would include those of no faith in this. But I also expect respect and acceptance of my beliefs from wider secular society. When this acceptance is threatened, we move into dangerous territory. For Christians in many parts of the world, living their faith means putting their lives in danger. I am able to practise my faith freely.

Although I was raised a Catholic, my faith has not always featured prominently in my life. Attending Mass once a week



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'I headed to the committee meeting, forgetting about the ash on my forehead'

was probably the extent of my Christianity and, as for many people, this was a tick-box exercise that held little spiritual significance. It certainly did not have an impact on my carefree lifestyle.

This changed when I became pregnant at the age of 25. It was an unplanned pregnancy and I was certainly not ready to be a parent. For probably the first time in my life I really prayed. It still haunts me that I considered an abortion, but at that moment of personal reckoning my dormant faith came alive. I continued with my pregnancy and gave birth to a beautiful boy, my son Martin.

When acceptance of others' beliefs is threatened, we move into dangerous territory

As a parent and an invigorated Christian, I decided to become more involved in my local church. I joined its justice and peace committee and became involved in campaigns such as Make Poverty History, nuclear disarmament, Fairtrade and calling for the closure of Dungavel detention centre.

I suppose when I look back at that time in my life it was also when my political activism started. I had always believed that Scotland should be an independent country, but I realised that everything I was campaigning for with my Church matched

SNP policy. The party constitution enshrining freedom of conscience meant that I could join the SNP without compromising my faith.

Maybe my display of ashes will encourage more people to be open about their faith. However, whether people choose to display their ashes is an entirely personal choice and every person will have their own reasons for practising their faith in a particular manner. For me and for Christians generally, the tougher challenge is how we respond to the call of the poor and the vulnerable, how we react towards refugees and how we tackle social injustice.

The best way we can evangelise is by the Christian example we show to others. For example, do we challenge headlines with phrases such as "swarm of migrants"? What is our reaction to people fleeing war zones? Are we sympathetic until these same people want to settle in our communities? I always ask myself, "What would Jesus do?"

My faith determines how I live my life, my relationships and my politics. Of course, I am by no means a perfect Christian but I believe that Christianity should be defined by real actions and not by ashes on a person's forehead. We should ask ourselves daily: "What actions will I take today that demonstrate my Christianity?"

Carol Monaghan is the SNP MP for Glasgow North West