

# From this week's Catholic Herald

## Comment

BISHOP PHILIP EGAN

### Evangelisation starts with an open door – literally

**R**ecently I spent a few days away from my diocese, but sadly every Catholic church I tried to call in on was locked shut. One I tried to go into to say a prayer even had a poster on its door proclaiming "From Maintenance to Mission".

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many Catholic churches up and down the country are now kept locked all day outside Mass times. Meanwhile, others, notably Anglican churches, many of which are in isolated or rural locations, are open to visitors and those who wish to come in to pray.

This seems to be tantamount to hypocrisy in the light of our current calls as Catholics to mission and evangelisation. How can the Catholic community say it is on mission when its key centres, its main buildings, its churches, are often firmly under lock and key?

In our Diocese of Portsmouth, I have been asking people to make sure that churches are kept open, at least for part of the day. Admittedly, my request has had a mixed response. Yet I ask again: if in our churches Jesus Christ is really and truly present in the Blessed Sacrament, why do clergy and others wish to lock Jesus away from his flock?

When I was a child, my father used to take my brothers and me out for a ride in the car after he finished work and before we sat down to supper. We would often call into our parish church on the way home to say a prayer. Thank God, our church was always open. In this way, Dad taught me a habit that would later be a great help as a teenager: to visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, especially when in need or in sadness or when something big was happening.

It was there in the semi-darkness, with the red sanctuary lamp flickering in the distance, that I had my first religious experiences. These led me to deeper friendship with the Lord in prayer and one day to the call to the priesthood.

My experience is not unique. The Alister Hardy Research Centre, now at the University of Wales, Lampeter, houses an archive with thousands of first-hand accounts by people who have had transforming spiritual or religious experiences. In his book *Religious Experience Today*, David Hay surveys these stories and notes the usual "triggers" of those experiences. These include the wonder of natural beauty, participation in religious worship



'Locking churches is tantamount to hypocrisy'

and hearing children playing in the background. Yet a top-most trigger is being alone in a church.

How easy it would be to post opening times by the front doors of our churches. Of course, if we are to keep the church open we need to be prudent and not leave the gold candlesticks untended. Sometimes people say to me that it's unsafe not to lock the church or there's a danger of vandalism.

True, these are dangers and there can be exceptional circumstances. But what about the requirements of insurers? I checked this with our diocesan insurance firm. They acknowledge that churches are places of worship and sanctuary, and that it is important for them to remain open and accessible. They say it makes no difference to the premium as to whether a church is left open or not.

**W**hen I was a parish priest, I used to go out of my way to ensure the church was kept open during daylight hours. I would also ask the laity to help with this. The key reason I have been encouraging parishes in our diocese not to lock their church is because it deprives the faithful of an opportunity to visit the Lord and to develop their spiritual lives.

I fear that the real reason many of our churches are locked is out of laziness and apathy, that is, a "maintenance mentality". Any authentic programme of mission

would see our parish churches as hugely important vehicles for evangelisation, especially if they have people on hand to help. They exist for anyone of any faith, practising or not, who wishes to come in for quiet reflection, to say a prayer in a moment of distress or need, to find out information about the Catholic faith or to draw closer to the Lord.

Our diocese has adopted the maxim "Bringing people closer to Jesus Christ through His Church". Indeed, we have in our churches the greatest treasure of all, Jesus Christ himself, really and truly present in the Blessed Sacrament. Why on earth would we wish to lock him away from people? Indeed, surely we have no right to do this.

In November 2015, after the terror attacks in Paris, Pope Francis said the doors of Catholic churches around the world should always remain open. "Please, no armoured doors in the church, everything open," he said. "There are places in the world where doors should not be locked with a key. There are still some but there are also many where armoured doors have become the norm."

He added: "We must not surrender to the idea that we must apply this way of thinking to every aspect of our lives. To do so to the church would be terrible."

*The Rt Rev Philip Egan is Bishop of Portsmouth*