

The remedy for current ills...

Bums on seats don't tell the whole story, but nearly a million youngsters turning out to welcome the Pope in Germany must be a healthy sign for the Catholic church in Europe. This was not a sort of Glastonbury on the Rhine – a mess of druggies and noise merchants turned out to celebrate a celeb-driven culture of death. Those hundreds of thousands of Catholic youth knew what to expect from Pope Benedict. Before he was elected Pope he was known as God's rottweiler, a man who makes a point of saying that the doctrines of the faith must not be diluted. He repeated that message last weekend and the teenagers cheered till they were hoarse.

So there are signs of hope. The secularised mass media loves to rubbish the church, talking it down endlessly with stories of empty pews and declining christening and marriage rates. Actually, it is becoming clear that it's secularism itself which has failed. Of course when the church accommodates itself to secular fashion – as the Church of England has done these last forty years – then the decline is both spectacular and deserved. But the truth is that where the church teaches the true faith it is thriving.

Pope Benedict wants to revive the Latin Mass and millions of Catholics are encouraging him to do so. The tin-eared modern language services inspire nobody. And the debunking sermons telling people they can no longer believe the Resurrection and the Virgin Birth have been listened to politely for too long. People are now telling those modernising priests and parsons that they have had enough of their drab scepticism and they would like the real church back, please.

The Christian faith is not declining – except in those parts of western Europe which have gone in for the modernising, debunking trash of the last generation of theologians and preachers. In South America Christianity, Catholic and Pentecostal, is thriving. Two thirds of the population goes to church regularly in the USA. In Russia and other outposts of the Eastern Orthodox church the faith is growing rapidly after seventy years of Communist dictatorship under which, in many places, the church was persecuted. And the Orthodox haven't altered their forms of worship for 1000 years!

Only in secularised Europe has the church shown signs of decline, and this falling off is now being reversed. I can speak with a little local experience of my own patch. I was a country parson in Yorkshire for fifteen years and I have been a City rector in London for seven. I have also served in Leeds, Manchester, Oldham and Bolton. And my experience over thirty-five years in town, country and metropolis is that where the traditional faith is presented in words that are worth their weight in gold – the Authorised version of the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and a sprinkling of the old Latin Mass now and again – the congregations grow.

Young couples come to be married according to the old Prayer Book – and most of them stay to become regular members of the congregation. The same goes for couples who bring their children to be christened. They don't come for a watered down, politically correct, demythologised corruption of Christianity with all the miracles taken out. They come for the full juice of the fruit. Just like those youngsters in Germany over the weekend. The best answer to our current difficulties is not to stand in judgement over those who profess a different faith, but to recover our own.

