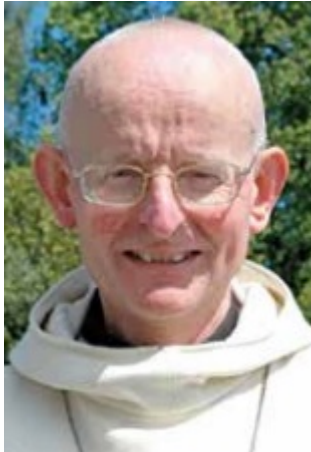


Catenians in Context

Hugh Gilbert OSB, Bishop of Aberdeen, spoke to Aberdeen Circle about our relevance today



The UK is not as Christian as it was. In 2001, 72% of people in England and Wales identified as Christian, 6% as belonging to other religions and 15% as having no religion. In 2011, 59% of people described themselves as Christian, 11% as of other religions and 25% as of no religion. This is a shift away from a Christian default position. People might have said: "I don't go to church but I do think of myself as Christian." That attitude is waning. What is growing is:

- a) the presence of other religions, Islam most conspicuously, and
- b) being of no religion, in some cases of being atheist, being spiritual but not religious, and being humanist.

There are variations between places and regions, but this generalisation does largely hold. When the Queen was crowned in 1953, every schoolchild in the country was given a copy of the New Testament. If Prince Charles becomes king, is that likely to happen?

With this goes the diminishment of Christianity in public life, aka secularisation. The Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor (a Catholic), distinguishes between three kinds of secularisation. We are currently experiencing the retreat of Christianity from public life, so national and local government, businesses, corporate bodies are religiously neutral. Religion becomes a private affair: the scouts no longer require a promise to God, the NHS makes available humanist chaplains.

At one level, this is a reasonable adjustment to the fact that the populace is not simply Christian. At another, it can be linked with a campaign to eliminate public signs of Christian identity, to propagate humanism.

There is also a growing ignorance of Christianity.

Is this a disaster? Not necessarily. The end of Christendom is not the end of Christianity, but arguably a return to a normal Christian position, something we can cope with.

To use the language of sociologists, we are becoming socially deviant. In many respects, we conform to life in our time and place. Secular does not have to mean unchristian. Still, if we are Christian, we have different attitudes, values and sometimes practices. There are contemporary flashpoints, like the life of the unborn, married life, end of life care. But there are also more subtle things, for example, in the realm of business, in our priorities, in customs around funerals and cremations. We go to Mass: a minority sport.

We cannot always think and act like the majority. The default Christian situation is: "in the world but not of the world". On the one hand, "strive to be at peace with all men", says the Letter to the Hebrews. Pay your taxes, say Peter and Paul. Conduct yourselves honourably among the gentiles. On the other hand, "do not be conformed to this world", says Paul. "Friendship with the world is enmity with God," says James.

Being deviant is difficult. We all succumb to peer pressure. St Paul speaks of the "spirit of the world" and of the "spirit of the air" (cf Eph 2:2; 6:12). To act, think or speak against this spirit is regarded as nonsensical or even as wrong.

How can we support each other? We neutralise peer pressure by sticking together, belonging to groups that help us express our faith.

Christianity will survive and thrive, not as a continent, but as an archipelago. It will exist as islands of concentrated Christianity, distinct and interconnected.

Spaces where we can breathe naturally as Christians, make the sign of the cross without self-consciousness, and from where we can return to our work in the world invigorated. How vital are the Christian family, the parish, religious communities, and voluntary lay Catholic associations like the Catenians.

To quote the website: "The Catenians are an association of Catholic laymen who are committed to their faith, their families, to those in need and to each other. Our primary purpose is to establish a network of friends, which enhances their family life, strengthens their faith and sustains them in difficult times. We support each other, the Catholic Church, young people and those in need."

This makes you highly contemporary. You meet a current need: the need to belong, a human and a Christian need. The future of Christianity depends on this kind of entity.

Early Christianity grew by networking. Converts were generally family, friends and colleagues, not crowds of outsiders.

So, please be convinced you have a place, a role, growing in importance day by day.

May I encourage you to keep recruiting. Someone said to me recently that he had discovered several Catholic professionals who had joined associations we do better not to join, simply for lack of a Catholic alternative.

May I encourage you to recruit both young and old. A transgenerational unity is precious, a richness which increases the pool of experience. St Benedict says: "Reverence the elders, love the juniors."
May I encourage you to continue recruiting from a variety of national backgrounds, to reflect the character of the local Church.

God bless you!