

# Soul purpose

New Zealand is one of the world's most secular societies but there is still a hunger for spirituality.



Critics might argue that consumerism is New Zealand's most popular religion and they could well have a point. On Easter Sunday, ministers and priests surveying their sparse and often-ageing congregations must feel unchristian pangs of envy at the thought of the crowds pouring through the doors of the local shopping mall.

New Zealand has become one of the world's most secular societies – far more so, for example, than Australia, where 22% of the population describes itself as having no religion, compared with 34% here. (That was in the 2006 census; if the historical trend continues, the latest New Zealand figure is likely to be higher.)

Census returns offer a fascinating picture of the shifting dynamics of religious affiliation. In the 1921 census, 45% of New Zealand's population was Anglican, 20% Presbyterian and less than 14% Catholic. But by 2006, Catholicism was nipping at the heels of the historically dominant Church of England, with 508,000 adherents to Anglicanism's 555,000. Catholicism is the only mainstream religion to have increased its following and some religious scholars predict the 2013 census will show the Church of Rome has overtaken that of Canterbury in this remote corner of God's pasture.

There's no doubting, however, that the overall trend is a steady decline in traditional religious belief. When the returns from the latest census are counted, they may well show that less than half the population professes adherence to Christianity.

Yet the picture is not straightforward. Whereas empty pews and greying worshippers present a forlorn spectacle in some churches, others are bursting at the seams. Catholic leaders speak of parishes being revitalised by immigrants from the Third World, where the church is expanding. There's an increasing likelihood that the priest in the pulpit will be Asian.

And although attendance at mainstream churches may be

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diminishing, there's an increasing profusion of alternative faiths offering a veritable smorgasbord of choices for those craving a spiritual element in their lives. The 2006 census listed an astonishing 120 variants of religious belief in New Zealand. Some are tiny – the Commonwealth Covenant Church had only 18 members – but others have bigger followings than might be supposed. Who would have thought, for example, that there were more than 2000 Wiccans in New Zealand? Or 1167 people who described themselves as Satanists?

American-style born-again churches, often led by stylish young husband-and-wife pastors, have cornered a segment of the religious market that traditional denominations clearly failed to connect with. And of course the changing ethnic makeup of New Zealand is reflected in the significant numbers of Hindus (63,000 in 2006), Buddhists (52,000) and Muslims (36,000).

Those trends aside, the overall decline of organised religion can be attributed to several factors. The liberal baby boomers who came of age in the 1960s and 70s rejected many of the inherited beliefs held by their parents and rejected even more heartily the subservience to authority that many traditional religions – most notably Catholicism – demanded. Religious sceptics would argue that with higher levels of education came a greater willingness to challenge and defy articles of faith that had gone unquestioned before. In addition, mainstream churches have been left frayed by scandal – most notably over sexual abuse in the Catholic Church – and by bruising clashes over such polarising issues as homosexuality and the ordination of women.

The new forms of belief and worship that have emerged out of the social and cultural upheavals of the past few decades are marked by greater informality, less compulsion and less slavish adherence to dogma. This is true even of Catholicism (see article, page 16). And there is more joy and spontaneity – words not commonly associated with the dour churches of old.

What is apparent is that for many New Zealanders, albeit a diminishing number, a hunger for spirituality persists. Paul Holmes, in his last interview, spoke of praying for God's mercy – a reminder that people often turn to religion at the time of greatest need. The widespread interest in the election of a new pope, and the optimism generated by the promise of a much-needed change of culture in the Vatican, suggests that we are not yet a wholly Godless society. ■

# Holy Smoke

Despite all the scandals and controversies, Catholicism is emerging as the country's most popular denomination. **by KARL DU FRESNE**

It can't have been easy being Catholic these past 10 years. Sexual abuse scandals – the most recent one, involving Scottish cardinal Keith O'Brien, generated headlines just as his fellow prelates were gathering to elect a new pope – have cast a deep shadow over Catholicism; the shameful cover-ups perhaps even more so.

Persistent rumours of corruption, conspiracy and power struggles within the Vatican bureaucracy have reinforced an impression of moral rot at the heart of the Church.

It comes as something of a surprise, then, to discover that New Zealand Catholics are unbowed. On the contrary, they are proud of their faith, optimistic about the future and heartened by the election of a new pope, Francis.

"Someone once said the Church is like a wise old grandmother with a lot of rubbish in her backyard," says author Joy Cowley, who converted to Catholicism 30 years ago. "On the outside, all you see is the backyard. Inside, you see the wisdom."

In common with Cowley, other Catholics spoken to by the *Listener* acknowledge that a lot has gone wrong in the Church but

cling to an unshakable belief in its essential goodness. And they insist Catholicism is in good heart in New Zealand, despite a steady drift away from the Church by the baby-boomer generation and its X and Y offspring.

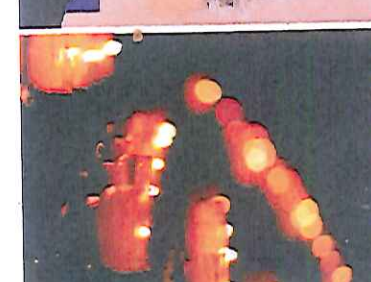
Statistics suggest their optimism may be justified. Although the number of New Zealanders declaring no religious belief is steadily increasing, making this one of the most secular countries in the world, the 2006 census showed the Catholic population had risen by 4.7% over the previous five years. In the same period, the number of Anglicans and Presbyterians sharply declined. If the trends have continued, the just-taken census should show Catholicism overtaking the Church of England as the denomination with the greatest number of followers in New Zealand.

That increase is thought to be partly related to the increasing number of Asian Catholic immigrants, which in turn

**"We are far from Rome – alluiaia!"**



Notable Kiwis brought up Catholic, including Sir Tipene O'Regan, Sir Turnu Te Heuheu and Michael King.



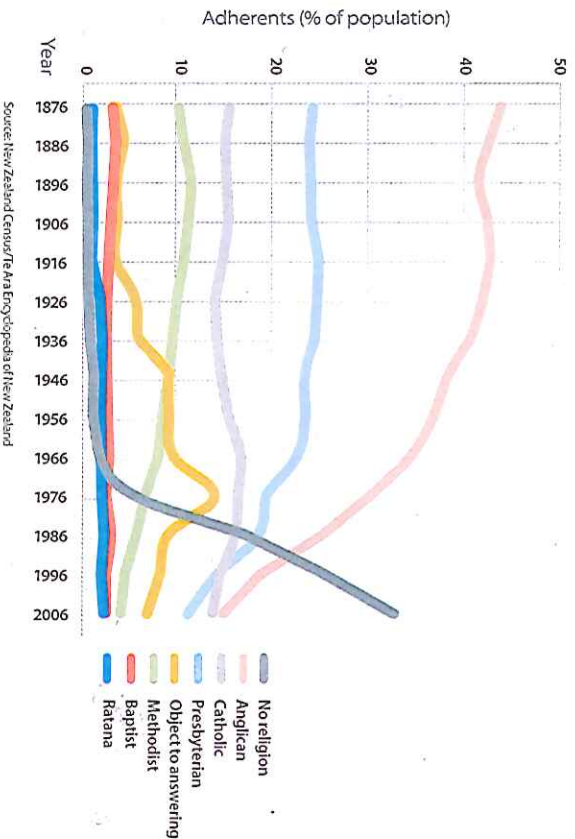
reflects the growth of Catholicism in the Third World. Four out of every 10 New Zealand Catholics under 25 are Asian, Maori or Pasifika.

That gives hope to Catholics who are otherwise dismayed at the secularisation of society and the decline in attendance at mass. Most of the older Catholics contacted by the *Listener* said their children and other family members had drifted away from the Church.

Surveys suggest even those who still declare themselves Catholic are less devout, or perhaps simply less obedient, than they used to be. Only 25% say they go to Sunday mass compared with 60% in the late 1960s, when attendance was considered compulsory.

Sister Margaret Anne Mills, head of the Sisters of Compassion in Wellington, has 17

## The changing Christian landscape



Source: New Zealand Census/Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand

nieces and nephews, all baptised as Catholics. She says some still go to mass, others don't, but when her extended family gets together and observes Catholic traditions, such as prayers, "they all seem comfortable with what we do".

Declining mass attendance may be symptomatic of a wider shift away from rigid adherence to rules. The mere fact that Catholics approached for this story were happy to speak frankly about the Church, and to criticise aspects of its doctrine and leadership, demonstrates how radically the Church has changed since it was tightly controlled by autocratic bishops such as Auckland's famous James Liston, who required his priests to submit their Sunday sermons to him in advance for approval. Certainly there is greater informality in

the Church and a much-reduced emphasis on once-binding rituals and protocols. Monica O'Connell of Wellington, who returned to the Church four years ago after a gap of 35 years, even revealed she addresses Archbishop John Dew, the head of the Church in New Zealand, as "John" – a degree of familiarity that would have once been unthinkable.

And Sister Margaret Anne says at family gatherings, no one hesitates to ask her to give a blessing or lead a liturgical celebration – roles that would once have been strictly preserved for a priest. She recalls a time when Catholics were required to fast for 12 hours before receiving the Eucharist – the communion wafers that, in Catholic belief, becomes the body of Christ. This often meant brides couldn't receive communion at their own wedding mass because fasting

would have left them weak from fatigue.

Catholics are now expected to fast for only one hour before communion. Similarly, the old prohibition on eating meat on Fridays to commemorate Christ's suffering and death, which in Christian tradition took place on a Friday, has long since been abandoned – much to the disappointment of fish and chip shop proprietors who were once able to count on heavy Catholic custom at least one day of the week.

John Landon, a retired lawyer who spent the first five years of his adult life training for the Catholic priesthood, recalls being inculcated as a child with Catholic doctrine relating to indulgences (remission from punishment for sin), the concepts of limbo and purgatory, and the difference between mortal and venial sins.

The modern church, he says, has "cut through a lot of that peripheral stuff that really has no foundation in scripture".

### "I LOVE THE MESSY BITS"

Catholics don't shrink from discussing the scandals and controversies that have blighted the Church. "Messy" was an adjective used more than once.

"I love the Church and I particularly love the human, messy bits, because I can relate to those," says Cowley, who was brought up in a fundamentalist Protestant tradition and dabbled in Buddhism, Hinduism and Sufism before being dragged off to mass by a South American Catholic family who befriended her while she was on a backpacking holiday. She says she immediately felt a sense of homecoming.

An acclaimed novelist and writer of children's stories, Cowley is married to a former priest, Terry Coles, who ministered to her former husband, Malcolm, when he was dying of lymphoma. Malcolm, too, was a Catholic convert. He was a World War II officer, Cowley says, and had noticed that Catholics returning from mass were the only soldiers who seemed calm before going into battle.

That M-word crops up again in conversation with Sister Margaret Anne. "The Church is messy, for sure," she says. But she believes the election of the new pope may signal a return to the "heart of the gospel" as spelt out in the New Testament (Matthew 25), where Christ enjoined his followers to feed the hungry and give shelter to the homeless.

There is a feeling that Pope Francis will be a new broom. Sister Margaret Anne was impressed that he made an immediate symbolic gesture by opting to wear simple white vestments rather than the more ornate garb worn by his predecessors. He made up his own mind, she says, rather than being influenced by the aides and functionaries around him.

Misgivings about the Roman Curia, the administrative apparatus of the Church, are widely shared. Gordon Copeland, a former United Future MP and Conservative Party candidate who is prominent in the Church, says he felt a sense of joy when he heard the

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# Catholic roll call

Some well-known New Zealanders who were brought up, or became, Catholic.

- Poets **James K Baxter** and **Sam Hunt**
- Artist **Ralph Hotere**
- Writers **Michael King**, **Dan Davin**, **MK Joseph**, **Amelia Batistich** and **Vincent O'Sullivan**
- Broadcasters **Tony Mora**, **Martin Devlin**, **Phil O'Brien**, **Pam Corkery**, **Mark Sainsbury**
- Architect **John Scott**
- Actresses **Lucy Lawless**, **Ginette McDonald** and **Catherine Saunders**
- Film and TV producer **Dave Gibson**
- Film director **Toa Fraser**
- Politicians **Jim Bolger**, **Bill English**, **Jim Anderton**, **Maggie Barry**, **Chris Finlayson**, **Steven Joyce**, **David Carter**, **Peter Dunne**, **Lianne Dalziel**, **Gerry Brownlee**, **Clayton Cosgrove** and **Damien O'Connor**
- Opera singer **Patrick Power**
- Merchant banker **Sir Michael Fay**
- Former Governor-General **Sir Anand Satyanand**
- Former Finance Minister **Ruth Richardson**
- Former Cabinet minister and Wellington Mayor **Fran Wilde**
- **Dame Whina Cooper**, Maori land rights campaigner
- Musicians **Tim and Neil Finn** and **Dave Dobbyn**
- Rugby players **Sean Fitzpatrick**, **Sir John Kirwan**, **Joe Karam**, **Conrad Smith** and **Kieran Crowley**
- Journalists **Pat Booth** and **Spiro Zavos**
- Fashion guru **Paula Ryan**
- Jurist **Sir Thaddeus McCarthy**
- Maori leaders **Sir Tumu Te Heuheu** (Tuwharetoa) and **Sir Tipene O'Regan** (Ngai Tahu)
- Former ambassador to the UN and chairman of the UN Security Council **Colin Keating**
- **Peter Cullinane**, chief operating officer of Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide
- **Pat Goodman**, founder of Goodman Fielder Wattle
- Philanthropist **TG Macarthy**, founder of the TG Macarthy Trust
- **Charles Todd**, founder of Todd Corporation

pope had taken the name Francis because St Francis of Assisi had been called by God to rebuild the Church. "And that [rebuilding] is what we need right now – not so much in terms of doctrine but in terms of the way the Curia operates. There really needs to be some solid change toward greater transparency."

Copeland – another convert who, like Cowley, came from a staunch Protestant background – would like to see a diminution of the Italian influence in the Curia, which he believes has been detrimental. He thinks it promising that the new pope has never been part of the Vatican bureaucracy and brings an outsider's perspective.

Copeland accepts that the credibility of the Church has taken a big hit as a result of sexual abuse scandals, but he believes it has responded decisively – in New Zealand, at least. Former police commissioner John Jamieson, a non-Catholic, was engaged by the Church in 2004 to review complaints of abuse and brought "huge energy and expertise" to the job, he says.

Did the scandals test Copeland's faith? "No, but along with most Catholics I feel ashamed of what has happened. It really is a scandal, but my faith is built on my relationship with God, and that's not affected by the actions of other people."

## APTING FAITH

So, what makes some Catholics remain true to their faith, and others return to it, when so many have lapsed? O'Connell, health and safety team manager for the Council of Trade Unions, says she came back to the Church after seeing her mother die from cancer four years ago. Deeply impressed by the warmth and support shown by her mother's New Plymouth parish and its two priests, she began attending the Church of St Mary of the Angels in Wellington.

Coming from a family with a strong belief in social justice, O'Connell was attracted by the Church's social teachings. "We were brought up to believe we are here to look after each other. Culturally, that's who I am." Catholicism seemed a natural fit with her trade unionism.

She's now training to be a pastoral leader – a lay (non-ordained) position in the Church, created in response to the decline in the priesthood – which will enable her to undertake some of the work previously done by priests. Not one to bow to authority, O'Connell thinks it's a good thing New Zealand is far removed from Rome. There's not the same rigid hierarchy.

Other Catholics agree that the Church in "God's farthest outpost" – the title historian Michael King gave to his history of

New Zealand Catholicism – has evolved in its own way. "We are far from Rome – all-Iulia!" says Sister Margaret Anne.

For Lunden, now retired in the Waitarapa after a legal career in Blenheim, an important part of Catholicism's appeal is its diversity and universality. He can go to mass anywhere in the world, he says, and feel something in common with fellow worshippers. "I can go to St Patrick's in Auckland at 11am on a Sunday and see the most amazing amalgam of humanity. And what are they doing there? It's not because of numbo-jumbo. It's a deeply held belief that has been 2000 years in the making and still has a lot of relevance."

Catholics point to the continuing popularity of Catholic schools as evidence of the Church's strength (see sidebar on facing page). Nearly 66,000 children – about 11% of pupils nationally – attend integrated Catholic schools, and they are often seen to be punching above their weight.

Products of the Catholic education system are found almost everywhere in public life, from politics to pop music. There are a notable number in New Zealand journalism. Expatriate journalist Spiro Zavos, who was taught by nuns and Marist priests, says his teachers were adamant that "we owed it to ourselves, our parents, our community and our religion to become lawyers and doctors and leaders in the community".

Zavos adds that he and his peers were taught a triumphalistic notion of Catholicism that helped them to become aggressively ambitious. "We were taught that Catholicism was 'the one true faith'. Knowing that in a sense we had God on our side was a help in making our careers." Cowley says she has seen a lot of change since she became a Catholic in 1982. The high fences around the Church have come down, she says, and there is a greater outreach to other faiths.

She admits there are "political" aspects of the Church that she disagrees with, "but I embrace the whole lot – the human, the political and the spiritual".

## RECONCILING PERSONAL BELIEFS

Asked about some of the contentious issues facing the Church, Catholics interviewed by the *Listener* responded with a range of views that demonstrated both the diversity of opinion within the Church and the willingness of rank-and-file Catholics to take positions that are at odds with official Church teaching.

Cowley, for instance, supports same-sex marriage. She also thinks it's inevitable that priests will eventually be allowed to marry,

which she believes could provide a solution to two nagging concerns: the decline in the priesthood and clerical sexual abuse.

Female priests? "That will come when men know how to work with women in the Church." Catholicism, she adds, has been hopping on one foot for too long.

She has no difficulty reconciling her personal beliefs with Church teachings. "They all exist on the surface. If someone is troubled by them, I say, 'Go deeper, go deeper.'"

Copeland says he, too, would like to see a married priesthood. Priestly celibacy is not divine law, he says, but something the Church decided to impose. But he's not so sure about female priests.

On contraception, despite being a self-described social conservative, he thinks there should be room for couples to exercise their own conscience.

Lundon, on the other hand, is sceptical about the benefits of a married clergy. "Other faiths have married ministers and it hasn't really helped. They're dwindling, too." He believes secularisation, not celibacy, is the core reason for the decline in religious vocations.

But he does believe women could take a much more active role in the Church, and points to the example of Victoria Matthews, the Anglican bishop of Christchurch, who he thinks is doing an outstanding job.

Another change Lundon would relish is the dismantling of the Curia. "We're top-heavy, which is why I'm really happy to have a Latin American pope, a man from a religious order [the Jesuits] that has a record of social justice and working for the poor."

Sister Margaret Anne isn't averse to change, either. "What women can do, we need to be encouraged to do," she says. She thinks change may come naturally as a result of the decline in the number of priests. "Look at how the rules have changed in our own lifetime."

O'Connell offers a different slant again, being "absolutely" in favour of the ordination of women but not the abolition of the requirement that priests remain celibate. She sees logic in the Church's position that priests should be wholly devoted to the service of God. "I think it's quite good that the priesthood is their life, not just a career."

All expressed optimism about the Church's future. Covley says Catholicism in New Zealand was undergoing revitalisation long before the election of the new pope. "What we see as a disaster in the Church [the sexual abuse scandals] has been part of that revitalisation," she says. "Sometimes, something has to be shaken empty before it can be filled." ■

## Schooled in the Church

Demand for places at Catholic schools often exceeds supply.

**D**amage to Catholicism's image internationally appears to have done little to dampen demand for a Catholic education, even from non-Catholic parents. At St Patrick's School, Taupo, principal Danny Nicholls says there's a waiting list of two years for the small number of places available to children from non-Catholic families.

The Catholic Education Office, which oversees the 238 state-integrated Catholic schools, says it's not uncommon for demand to exceed supply, especially in places of high population growth such as Auckland. "If there is space, a Catholic school is entitled to have up to 5% non-Catholic pupils," says Susan Apáthy, deputy chief executive of the office. "In some schools that are not full, there is considerable demand from non-Catholic families."

Other parents must prove they are Catholic, though not necessarily practising. Nicholls says only a small percentage of parents at St Patrick's are

regular attendees at Sunday mass.

Why should non-Catholics, and Catholics who no longer practise their faith, be so keen to get their children into Catholic schools? "Our understanding, anecdotally, is that people are very keen on the values and general ethos of Catholic schools," says Apáthy. "We hear this repeatedly." Asked how those values might differ from the ones taught in state schools, she diplomatically demurs. "I will not be drawn on that one."

Nicholls, who is in his fourth year as principal of St Patrick's, a year 1-8 school with a roll of 210, agrees that values are an attraction for many parents. His school runs a values programme as well as providing education in the Catholic faith.

But he says people also sense a feeling of community in the school. That may be partly because it's relatively small, but he thinks it's also because the school is aligned with the local Catholic community.

Having a school uniform appeals to many parents, too, Nicholls says. It's not only a great leveller but also fosters a sense of identity and "sets a standard and an expectation of parents".

He says he is "very upfront" with prospective non-Catholic parents, emphasising that their children will receive religious education – which typically is given the same amount of time as any other subject – and attend mass on days of religious significance. If any parents later come to him with "issues" about the Catholic component of their children's schooling, he reminds them of that first conversation. But it has only happened twice.



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