



# Faith Matters

*Simple reflections on our faith*

by Marilyn Bergeron

## Faith on the Rise: Hopeful News for the Church

Good news! There are many encouraging signs that fewer people are leaving Christianity than in the past. As well, there is a surprising increase in Christian faith among younger people.

Sales of the Bible, already the best-selling book worldwide, increased by 22% in the USA last year.

### **INCREASED INTEREST**

Friends in Vancouver have told me about the rapid increase of young people joining the Alpha program to learn more about Jesus. People are being drawn to enter a Church without knowing why.

A group of small parishes in the London area report over 60 people asking to join their RCIA program to learn more about the Catholic faith. Another 40 are already signed up for this fall. That's people dropping by and asking!

Locally, one parish grew in 2 years from one new person initiated into the Catholic Church, to 14 people this year. That's wonderful news. People are searching for the truth, for Jesus.

The Economist magazine suggests lockdowns and social isolation left many young people lonely or depressed, and looking for meaning. Surprisingly, young men are leading this change.

### **BE WELCOMING**

That said, these people, hungry to learn and grow in their faith have a wide choice of Christian Churches to choose from. How do we encourage them to come our way?

Every Christian has a role to play! How we welcome people is key. As Catholics, we have much to learn from our evangelical brothers and sisters. Generally, they excel at greeting and welcoming newcomers.

Many of our parishioners grew up in the Catholic Church. They've been there forever, have friends to connect with and sit in the same pew every Sunday. They are less likely to reach out.

- How do we welcome newcomers, drop-ins, visitors from away?
- Do we recognize them or do we just smile and watch them come and leave at the end of Mass?

- How do we engage them in conversation?
- How do we know whether they are visiting friends or if they are looking for a place to belong? Do we ask?
- What can we offer them and how?

Many newcomers will try different parishes until they feel comfortable somewhere. Why not our church?

### **PATIENT, CARING, & OPEN-MINDED**

Church communities have changed. When I was young, people were only accepted if they “Believed and then they Belonged”. In other words, “Outsiders” were not readily welcomed. That has changed to “Belong, and then Believe.”

Feeling welcomed, comfortable, and belonging often comes first with the younger generations. When they sense they belong, they are far more open about wanting to know Jesus and to learn about our faith.

People will try out different communities. Jesus has called them and they want to respond! They will watch and learn in their time and His time, not ours.

We need to be patient, caring and open-minded. If heads turn and voices mumble when someone walks into the Church dressed very casually, or kneels when others sit, or stands out somehow, they will feel it. If we give “the eye” to young mothers whose babies cry during the Mass, we are telling them they aren’t welcome. We need to thank and bless them for bringing their babies to Church. They are the future.

### **A CHALLENGE FOR YOU**

The time is right for change. We have been comfortable for too long. Let’s begin now with this challenge. Start a conversation this week with someone you don’t know.

Try one of these starters:

- *Hi! I don’t think I’ve met you before. My name is.*
- *Can you tell me something about yourself... family, or work or hobby?*
- *Good morning. Are you new here or have I just not met you?*
- *That was a thoughtful homily wasn’t it?*
- *It’s so nice to meet you. Do you have any questions about our parish?*
- *I hope to see you here next week. Maybe we could chat again?*

We must learn to genuinely welcome people, to share our faith experiences with others, and to work together in teams to make change happen.

**May God bless your efforts this week.**