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Reflections on Catholicism in France as an outsider

Pat Perriello | Jul. 30, 2013 NCR Today

While the world has been watching Pope Francis in Brazil at World Youth Day, I was in France with my wife, daughter, and son-in-law.

Let me share a few somewhat random reflections.

We attended Mass in Andé, a small country village in Normandy. There were about half a dozen lay members of the community who appeared to be taking care of the church. They had a visiting priest from the Congo. Clearly there was no real parish life, but rather, this faithful remnant needed to be constantly seeking a visiting priest to say Mass for them. Many of the surrounding small villages seemed to be following the same pattern. They would actually rotate weeks in which Mass would be said in their particular village.

We also attended Mass at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. My impression was that there were more local Europeans attending Mass than on my last trip to Europe. Obviously this is a very subjective impression. However, the Mass site at the cathedral was full, and while no doubt the majority of the people there were tourists, there were still a significant number of attendees who were familiar with the prayers and customs in a way that suggested they were local residents. I would be interested in comments or information from any who might know what the truth of the matter may be.

I'm pretty sure any change is not due to Pope Francis because he hasn't been pope long enough to effect such change. Is it possible that Pope Benedict's effort to revitalize Christianity in Europe had some effect?

At any rate, I have to say that my impression of the liturgy in France was that it stressed formality and reverence, but I saw little evidence that it did much to connect with people. Of course, not understanding the language makes any of my judgments suspect. Yet it is interesting that at the Notre Dame Mass there was no Prayer of the Faithful and only men were involved as lectors and extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist. If indeed there is an awakening of faith in Europe, it would be unfortunate if the church were to miss the opportunity because of a lack of outreach to the people. I understand that Pope Francis authorized elements from the charismatic movement [1] into the Masses in Brazil.

It is also worth mentioning that there was a certain irony in this focus on the sacred and showing reverence as dozens and dozens of tourists walked up and down the aisles talking and taking pictures during the Mass.

Finally, I need to mention that we visited the D-Day beaches in Normandy, specifically the museum at Arromanches, Omaha beach and the Normandy American Cemetery. It was a very sobering experience, especially when so many of our World War II veterans are dying off each year. Although I don't have any memories of World War II itself, so much of the culture as I was growing up was focused around the events of this tragic war. A good friend of mine lost his dad in the war; he was killed in action before he ever had a chance to see his newborn son. This was so typical for far too many families of the era. It was very special to be there and remember the sacrifices of the thousands of young people who died in that terrible war.

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[1] http://mankatofreepress.com/statenews/x1913001538/Pope-concludes-visit-to-Brazil-with-huge-Mass-on-beach