

Christianity: boring, untrue and irrelevant?

Joseph Grech

If you asked Manfred Galdes and Andrew Mizzi the above question eight years ago, they would have probably said 'yes'. Galdes used to go to Church on Sundays, "but only out of duty". Mizzi had completely given up going to Mass. It no longer offered what he wanted. He became disinterested, an agnostic verging on the atheistic. But deep in his heart he knew this was not right.

Then they came across the 'Alpha course', which advertises itself as "an opportunity to explore the Christian faith in a relaxed, informal, friendly and fun way over 10 thought-provoking weekly sessions". Galdes only agreed to give it a chance because Sandra, now his wife, wanted to go herself, and because he was going through a difficult patch with health-related problems. Mizzi decided to go to listen, "to give God a chance". At least he could say his claim to be an atheist was a final decision.

According to the Alpha course website alpha.org, over 13 million people worldwide have attended the course to date, which runs in thousands of churches of all Christian denominations, including the Catholic Church. It is open to people of all ages, Christian, agnostic, atheist or other faiths. But it is particularly aimed at Catholics who no longer practice.

In 2007, over 33,500 courses were offered in more than 160 countries. In Malta, the course was first run 10 years ago by the Institute for World Evangelisation (ICPE), a group of full-time lay missionaries which started in Malta and is now based in Rome.

A typical session starts with a meal at 7.30 p.m., during which participants can unwind after a day's work, and get to know each other in an informal, friendly atmosphere. They then watch a 45-minute DVD recording of a talk in English by Nicky Gumble, a gifted, charismatic Anglican priest who presents the course topics in a light-hearted yet challenging way relevant to people's lives today.

Each session tackles a different question such as 'Who is Jesus?', 'Why did he die?', 'Why should I pray?', 'Why should I read the bible?', 'Does evil exist?', 'Does God heal today?', 'How does God guide us?', 'What about the Church?', and 'What about my faith?'.

After the talk, participants split into smaller groups, depending on their ages and language preference, and for the next 45 minutes discuss their views on the topic. Each session ends at about 10 p.m.

Halfway through the course there is also a weekend away to tackle questions on the Holy Spirit such as 'Who is the Holy Spirit?', 'What does the Holy Spirit do?', and 'Can I receive the Holy Spirit?'.

Galdes remembers driving his group leader crazy, dismissing and challenging everything he said. "Deep down I was searching for something more, but I was only



arguing things out with my intellect." But as the weeks went by, he slowly started to relax his guard, and his outlook changed. "Today I can say I have a relationship with Jesus. It is not just knowledge about him, but of him."

He says the Alpha course essentially helps participants find out who Christ is in a personal way. "And when we understand Christ, we understand his Church, and feel a sense of belonging to it."

After attending the course, going to Mass meant something completely different to Mizzi. "I re-understood my Christian faith as an adult. It was not like when I was 10 attending *dutrina* (catechism lessons) that I was probably not even listening to. The course left a lasting effect."

Today, Galdes, director of a gov-

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ernment agency, and Mizzi, who runs a family-owned import business, form part of the Catholic lay community, 'City on a Hill', which organises the course twice a year.

They conduct their work in a few rooms in the basement of Tal-Ibraġ parish centre offered by parish priest Fr Anthony Agius, who continued extending support that was initially offered by his predecessor, Fr Gordon Refalo.

Members of the community that facilitate the small group discussions, but rather than preach or give definite answers, they ask challenging questions. Sandra, an assistant manager at an insurance agency, explains that "we could give them all the answers in the world but if they are not prepared to open their heart they are going to continue arguing. In fact, we

encourage people to find answers for themselves. Once they do, they will hold on to it."

What do the Alpha course facilitators do when the more sceptical people attending criticise Church teaching on, for example, condom use, homosexuality, or the ban on women becoming priests?

"We defend it," says Galdes unhesitatingly, "because there are very valid reasons why the Pope and the Church has certain positions. There's absolutely no question of diluting the truth. But whereas in the past there was a lot of emphasis on the fire and brimstone approach, today you don't hear that much of it in the Church."

There has been a shift of emphasis. And I think the emphasis of this course is about bringing people into a relationship with God.

Galdes recalls that one participant was from the Moonie sect, and he came with many resistances and thousands of questions. Today he is a fully-committed member of a Missionary Society of Saint Paul (MSSP) lay community. Galdes says "Our jaw dropped when we saw the change that had taken place in him. We asked ourselves: 'Is this the same person who came to the course?'"

Over the past 10 years, attendance at each course has grown from between 10 and 20, to an average of 50 participants. After each course, many want to continue in some way. "Our community is one of the options, but we also propose various others. It depends on what the people are looking for," says Galdes.

The worldwide popularity of the Alpha course contrasts with falling attendances at Sunday Mass in Malta and many countries in the West. But Galdes points out that the Church is made up not only of those who attend Mass but also people in many small communities. "People tend to stigmatise or forget about them, but from its inception the Church was basically made up of small groups of people coming together in extraordinary ways."

"There is definitely a trend towards people wanting to

experience Christ within smaller groups. The Alpha experience actually helps lead people back to the Church. In fact, there has been an increase in congregations in churches where Alpha is run," he says.

Still, the Alpha course is not without its critics. On the internet one finds articles criticising it as not being sufficiently faithful to the true image of God, of Jesus, and of sin, as presented in the bible, and of over-emphasising the Holy Spirit, for example.

The criticism is unjustified says Galdes. Besides speaking about the truths accepted by all Christian denominations, the course in Malta is supplemented by parts that are strictly Catholic, such as confession and the Eucharist. Charles Buttigieg, the Curia's public relations officer, confirms that the Church approves the Alpha course as it is being run in Malta.

One of Galdes' favourite quotes from Gumble's talks is: "Being born in a Christian country makes

you Christian as much as being born in a McDonald's makes you a hamburger". He says this is especially true of Malta. "This is the big difference between religiosity and spirituality. In Malta there is a lot of the latter," he says, referring to the many processions taking place during Holy Week.

"We Maltese have a tendency to believe that just because we are born in Malta, that makes us Christian. Baptism may make us Roman Catholic, but at some point in our life we have to decide whether we want to take our beliefs seriously."

The next Alpha course starts on Thursday at 7.30 p.m. in the basement of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception church, Triq il-Kwarta, Ibraġ. Another will be held on October 1.

There is no fee and no obligation to complete the course. Costs are met entirely by donations.

For more information, phone Andrew Mizzi on 7982 3847, e-mail info@alpha.org.mt or visit www.alpha.org.mt.

Nicky Gumble

Nicky Gumble, 54, is an English barrister, theologian, author and Anglican minister. He graduated in law in 1976, but left the legal profession in 1982 to train for ordination to the Church of England.

He joined the Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) church in Knightsbridge, London, as curate in 1986. He was ordained priest in 1987, and was installed vicar at HTB in 2005.

The Alpha course was started in 1973 by Fr Charles Marnham, a curate at HTB, as a course on the basics of the Christian faith. Fr Gumble was given responsibility for the course in 1990. He revised it and transformed it into a worldwide phenomenon.

He is author of various books including *Questions of Life*, which has sold over one million copies. Voted 'Christian Book of the Year' in 1994, it has been translated and published in 48 languages.



He is married to Pippa and have three children.

To watch Fr Gumble deliver the first talk of the course, entitled, 'Christianity: Boring, Untrue and Irrelevant?' visit the website: <http://video.google.co.uk/videoplay?docid=3582267845277891274&q=nicky+gumble>.