

Photos reveal what's sacred to young Poles in Britain

Everyone is aware of the large number of Polish people who have migrated to Britain with the expansion of the European Union, and most people know that they come from a Catholic country. But until Pete Ward and Sarah Dunlop began this research with young Polish Catholics, we knew little about how their religion plays out in the UK. To answer this question, the research asked the young people themselves to take photos of what is sacred to them – and the results were surprising.



One young Polish participant's photograph entitled 'Gentle Mary Watches over the Plymouth Sea'

The research was carried out in Plymouth, using the Roman Catholic Cathedral of St Mary and St Boniface as a base from which young volunteers were recruited. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with them, and participants were offered the opportunity to take part in a photography training workshop. The photos they took turned out to be of such high quality that they formed an exhibition which was shown at the Cathedral and later at King's College London. But it was not just their artistic value which was admired – they also proved effective as a way of eliciting deep responses about meaning, identity and spirituality, and generating powerful conversations about what matters to people.

The project found that many young Poles have experienced both loneliness and isolation, and some have been insulted and denigrated by British people who resent their presence. Many are also disturbed by the apparent lack of religious practice in Britain. Yet finding themselves outside of a context of religious obligation forced them to decide what they believed and whether to practice. Belief often remained the same, whilst practice shifted more.

Nor surprisingly, pictures of family, spouses, partners and close friends were some of the most common photos. One young person even took a picture of a mobile phone, because this was the 'sacred object' which kept open communication with loved ones back home. Some took pictures of empty or abandoned churches to show how Britain appeared to them. Catholic imagery remains important, and pictures of angels and of Mary, were noticeable. Some young people developed more openness towards other forms of Christianity, and many took photos of nature and of the sea.

What was clear was that the theological could not be isolated from the ordinary. Theological themes such as the Bible, Christ, light and Mary the Mother of God were mixed in with family, Polishness, custom, eating. The institutional and the everyday feed into and rely upon each other.

The Catholic Diocese of Plymouth and Plymouth Arts Centre provided materials for the exhibition of participants' photographs, and youth officers from the local Catholic Diocese have learned through the project more about how to engage with their newer young members.

Find out more...

- Access an article for *Practical Theology* about the research by Peter Ward and Sarah Dunlop: <http://www.equinoxjournals.com/PRTH/article/viewArticle/10379>
- Read coverage of the exhibitions of participants' photographs staged in Plymouth and London: http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/devon/hi/people_and_places/religion_and_ethics/newsid_8370000/8370409.stm; <http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=17423>

You might also be interested in...

- Reading about an event on youth and religion the Religion and Society Programme co-organised with King's College London at which both Peter Ward and Sarah Dunlop spoke and some project photographs were put on display: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/young_people_and_religion_event
- The book *Gods Behaving Badly: Religion and Celebrity Culture* by Pete Ward published by SCM Press in 2010: <http://www.chbookshop.co.uk/books/9780334043355/Gods-Behaving-Badly>
- A research training paper on visual methods by Sarah Dunlop for the University of Kent's studying religion resource: <http://www.kent.ac.uk/religionmethods/documents/Visual%20Approaches.pdf>

Award Title

Migration and Visual Culture: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Catholic Imagery and Popular culture among Polish Young

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Award Type

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