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# POINT REYES LIGHT

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St. Columba's thriving under contemplative priest



Teresa Mathew

Father Vincent Pizzuto teaches meditation and contemplative Christian practice at St. Columba's Church, where he is credited with bringing back a diminished congregation.

By Teresa Mathew  
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The pews of St. Columba's Episcopal Church and Retreat House held just a handful of stalwart souls for years. Now they are full again on Sundays. Congregants arrive from Inverness or from as far away as Oakland to sit under the gaze of a

Botticelli-inspired Madonna, a stained-glass window depicting a little white church on a bay, and the tender, searching gaze of Father Vincent Pizzuto.

Father Vincent was appointed vicar to the church nearly two years ago, and parishioners new and old agree the congregation has more than quadrupled over that time because of their charismatic new priest.

Since his arrival in 2017, the reverend has dramatically increased programming, from fireside chats to lecture series on the intersection of Christianity with topics like politics and sustainability to workshops on meditation.

A professor of the New Testament at the University of San Francisco, Father Vincent also brought with him members of a small community he previously built around the study and practice of contemplative Christian spirituality.

“One of the things I started to realize early on is this retreat house has a lot of different doors, and that people are going to enter from different places,” he said on a recent Sunday. “For some, the entry point is the church. For others, it’s our community suppers in Frick Hall. For some it’s the chapel door for meditation [or] the side door for retreat. For 40 years, these doors were shut to this community, and it was my job to blow them off the hinges.”

Father Vincent was born into a Roman Catholic family in New Jersey, and grew up expecting that he would be ordained in that tradition. “I wanted to be a priest in utero,” he said. “I can’t remember a time when I didn’t.” But after coming out in college, he sought out an order that would neither condemn his sexuality nor prevent him from having an intimate relationship—a condition for Catholic priests.

“I did not run from my Christianity as so many gay men and lesbian women were forced to do,” he said during a sermon on his wedding day in July. “Rather, I delved more deeply into it, knowing that I had to stand as a ballast, a bulwark, against those who would lead my brothers and sisters to believe they had been abandoned by God as abominations.”

For his ministry, Father Vincent turned to the Old Roman Catholic Church, a branch with more liberal views on women priests and gay marriage. He was ordained in 2006, and soon formed a Christian community that was rooted in the Celtic tradition.

He had been interested in meditation and silent, transcendental modes of prayer since childhood. A new world opened up for him when he encountered the centuries-old Christian tradition rooted in contemplation and meditation.

“All my life I was looking for my Yoda,” he laughed, “someone who could guide me more deeply into this tradition.” Finally, because no Yoda appeared, he decided instead to create a community of people of all faith backgrounds who were seeking the kind of spiritual clarity he sought.

In “Contemplating Christ: The Gospels and the Interior Life,” one of two books he has published on faith and theology, Father Vincent writes, “The rise of modern atheism in the West along with the precipitous decline in church attendance must be understood, at least in part, as a purifying corrective to the spiritual, moral, and imaginative failures of our religious institutions.”

He sees contemplation as a spiritual channel through which communities can be strengthened, writing that “asceticism amounts to nothing if in the end it does not open us ever more deeply to the possibility of loving and being loved.”

Father Vincent named his contemplative community New Skellig after Skellig Michael, an island off the coast of County Kerry, Ireland that is home to a Celtic Christian monastery. The group held meetings rich with meditation, conversation and potluck meals once a month in his home in Fairfax. But as it expanded, Father Vincent decided to petition the Episcopal Church, which he felt still contained strains of Celtic tradition, to absorb him and his new community.

The process took three years, but in December 2014 the church determined that his orders were valid and welcomed him as an Episcopal priest.

Meanwhile, in Inverness, St. Columba’s lost its last full-time priest in 2015. For the next year, the church rotated through supply priests who would appear on a Sunday, say mass, and go.

“During that period of time, everything got neglected,” said Carl Diehl, a junior warden of the church. “Not only pastorally, but the physical place: the building, the grounds. Just in the year and a half Father Vincent has been here, there’s been an enormous change. He has repaired the congregation, brought us up.”

The congregation had also shrunk in size such that the church was downgraded to a mission. So when the priest position opened in 2015, it was quarter-time.

For Father Vincent, it was a welcome sign. He and his now-husband Fernando Esponda had moved from San Francisco to Fairfax in 2008. The pair made frequent weekend trips to West Marin and soon discovered St. Columba’s. Father Vincent fell in love with the church’s beauty and “old-world feel,” but, as a professor, he was in no position to be a full-time priest.

In April 2017, he mustered the quarter-time position as vicar—the term used for a part-time priest, as opposed to a rector, who is full time. The position grew to half-time a year later due to St. Columba’s already rebounding congregation. The goal, Father Vincent said, is to grow the community to the point where St. Columba’s becomes a designated parish once more.

Some of the 27 attendees at the contemplative Christian workshop this Tuesday were not regular parishioners. “I’ve never been a regular churchgoer,” said Laura Brainard, who identifies as both Hindu and Buddhist. “But Father Vincent is like a magnet.” Ms. Brainard helps lead bi-weekly meditation sessions in the chapel that grew out of past workshops.

Of those who come to the programs, Father Vincent said, “I know these people are not going to end up in my pews on Sunday, but they’re encountering an intelligent, open-minded, challenging form of Christianity. Could five or 10 years from now that re-shape their willingness to take a step into the door? If not, we had a wonderful time together.”

If guests at the retreat house attend a service, said Susan Rangitsch, a longtime congregant, Father Vincent’s sermons often keep them coming back. Though St. Columba’s has long had the retreat, guests had to be Christian in order to utilize it. Not anymore.

“The way I look at it, if they’re coming to a Christian retreat house, it’s the first step for dialogue, so come on in!” Father Vincent exclaimed. “I thought, why are we shutting and locking all these doors? Why are we saying the only entry point is the church?”

Tom Williams said that St. Columba’s had become a more open, welcoming space since Father Vincent had arrived. Before, Mr. Williams said, the church “used to be more like a spiritual club.” Now, he added, “it’s gone through a lot of changes for the better.”

When Monica Doblado, a New Skellig member, first began coming to St. Columba’s, “there were less than nine people every Sunday,” she said. “It was very small and homogenous. Now it’s vibrant, there’s music. Before it was hit or miss. It’s been awesome to witness—there’s easily 30 to 50 [congregants], depending on the time of year.”

Father Vincent has not only grown his congregation, but also evolved practices. As part of a move to integrate contemplation, he uses a Celtic rite during mass on first Sundays. Most people have embraced the Celtic mass, he said, though one parishioner “respectfully agreed” to go to another parish on those weeks.

Elizabeth Jones, who first came to St. Columba’s 25 years ago, admitted that while the first Sundays draw in far more people—57 attended the Celtic mass in September—she is happier with the familiar liturgy on the other three weeks of the month.

But even that liturgy has undergone an upgrade: Father Vincent has swapped the service’s liturgical readings from the Shakespearean Rite 1 to the more modern Rite 2. “Most people rolled with it, some celebrated it, and a few were very upset and probably still are disappointed,” he acknowledged.

The reason behind the change, he explained, was that Rite 1’s theology “is born of Elizabethan England and has a very monarchical understanding of God, who is King and Lord.” That, he said, was hardly going to resonate with the “West

Marin resident who likes to find God hugging trees.” For a priest looking to grow his flock, the more open the message, the better.

Father Vincent pays deep attention both to language and its resonance. He has lectured for 18 years, but only been preaching for 20 months. Preaching, he said, is radically different. “It’s not about critiquing tradition, or intellectual veracity. It’s about inspiring people and showing them the beauty of the tradition. And how much they’re loved,” he said.

His parishioners say that, in large part, they come because of his preaching. Ms. Jones, who has seen three full-time priests come and go at St. Columba’s, said previous priests’ sermons were “good, interesting, challenging”—but that Father Vincent’s are better. “First of all, he’s brilliant,” she said. “His sermons are way deeper, 99.9 percent, than any other priest.”

The second week he attended one of his services, Mr. Diehl remembers Father Vincent breaking down and weeping about love in relationships in the middle of a sermon.

“I’d never seen that before, and I’d been to a lot of sermons,” Mr. Diehl said. “As I came back week after week, I realized that’s who Father Vincent is: for him it’s not a question of belief, but living out the Christian message in his own life. Except for a couple times I’ve been out of the country, I don’t think I’ve missed a single Sunday.”

Anna Haight, a junior warden, was baptized in November at St. Columba’s (in a horse trough bedecked with white cloth and flowers). She attributes the decision to Father Vincent and the church community.

“I never thought I’d come back to a Christian church,” she said. “I had too many questions. But here I am, and I’m happy. [St. Columba’s] was a place where I didn’t have to check my brain at the door. It was okay not to swallow everything.”

Katherine Mitchell, an Inverness resident who had been reluctant to attend mass in the past, said her relationship with Father Vincent has been life-changing.

“I wanted to grow spiritually, but there wasn’t much place for that in Inverness,” she said. “No church would be friendly to someone like me, with all kinds of doubts. I’ve never been in any community that has the love we have here, and he’s the reason.”

Above all, Father Vincent wants to give his parish that sense of being loved. “People are lonely,” he said. “I think we live in a world where there’s so much loneliness people can’t admit to or acknowledge. What we crave, whether we admit to it or not, is communal intimacy. Not just between spouses, but a community which is not just friendly, neighborly, but intimate. And I’m trying to foster that at St. Columba’s in such a way that people feel vulnerable enough to risk that.”