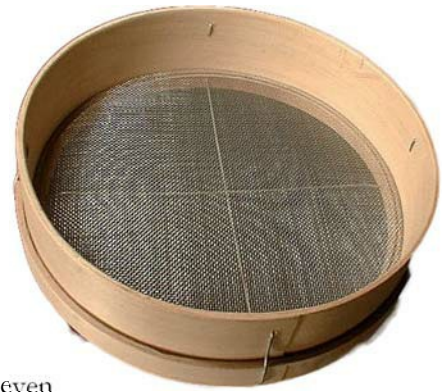


SOF Sift

A column in which Network members think out loud about SOF and their own quest.

Margaret Connolly, LLantwit Major, Wales



Tuesday morning. No visitors yet to the Galilee Chapel at St Illtud's Church, where I am on my weekly Welcoming duty. Better do some cleaning. The Celtic Houelt Cross watches me serenely. Houelt king of Glwysin (modern Glamorgan) 'prepared this cross for the soul of Res his father' over a thousand years ago. Houelt, Res and St Illtud himself: they are all here with me as I mop.

We came to Llantwit Major, or Llanilltud Fawr, the Great Church of Illtud, six years ago, following my husband's desire to return to his native Wales. The move has also given me a new path, a turning of the old way, as all new paths are. Carved onto the Houelt cross is a labyrinth, a way to follow with twists and turns.

My journey began in a Methodist manse, the child and grandchild of ministers. An only child, I felt a bit special, since in a mining village, the Methodist church was more of the Establishment than the parish church, and so I grew up feeling myself to be part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. A move to a middle class suburb at seven shocked me. No longer was I at the top of the tree socially and ecclesiastically. I was not 'a proper vicar's daughter.'

Going to university to study History, I failed to force myself to attend Methsoc, and joined the Anglican Society. Sung Evensong and the National Pilgrimage to Walsingham, a pleasant and familiar taste of once again being 'safe and superior'. I was confirmed, so I didn't have to pretend any more to be Church of England. Of course, it did not last. I had always loved to read Catholic death announcements, with their beautiful and romantic wording: 'Of your charity pray for the repose of the soul of Bridget Carney, who died fortified by the rites of our Holy Mother the Church.' Ah, lucky Bridget Carney. If I died, there would be nothing like that for me.

When I married a Catholic, it looked to me as if there was a chance! We attended the Children's Mass at a Dominican church, and were able to help by giving homilies and distributing Communion. I was happy to be part of the family there. However, my husband decided that public liturgy was not to his taste, and joined SOF, which met at Loughborough University. This didn't interest me much, as I was still enthusiastic about becoming a Catholic, which I eventually did. I found this experience such a let-

down. I did not even receive a certificate, never mind an invitation to spend a week at Castel Gondolfo, the papal summer residence! Yet there were things to admire: I loved the words of the Easter Vigil, and the dark church, and singing 'Christ our Light.' I was shocked when work colleagues seemed to expect me to have certain views if I was a Catholic. Belief had never played much part in my religious appreciation. I was amazed, too, when someone at Holy Cross said they actually believed in purgatory.

When we moved out of the city and I was working full time, we gave over going to church regularly, all our children now having been processed through the First Communion system. When I became a headmistress, I enjoyed taking assembly. I could be the minister and mother to all the strands of my community.

After we moved we paid a couple of taster visits to churches locally, but none seemed to be academically equal to our Dominican church. Shortly after this, there was a Flower Festival in the local Church in Wales Benefice. I attended a service at a small church, overlooking the sea. A quiet, holy place, with a kindly congregation who made me welcome. About the same time, a friend from the local History Society showed me the parish records in the church office in Llantwit Major, and while we were there, someone was hoovering the stairs and I said I wouldn't mind helping as a Welcomer too.

Sitting in the church each week, meeting visitors both to the church office and the newly opened Galilee Chapel, led to my becoming part of the church community, and acquiring jobs in the church. The Celtic stones seem to have absorbed a millennium of prayer and holiness, and I feel safe close to them. In the Cuthbert Compline we say:*

Whoever has chosen
To make the shelter of the Most High
Their dwelling place
Will stay in his over-shadowing.

Tomorrow I will light another candle for Houelt and Res and St Illtud, my friends.

*The quotation is taken from *Celtic Daily Prayer*, Collins 2005, page 35.