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## **2816: St Paul the Apostle, Croxteth, Liverpool, England**

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**Mystery Worshipper:** Geraldine Majella.

**The church:** St Paul the Apostle, Croxteth, Liverpool, England.

**Denomination:** [Church of England](#). St Paul's is a Forward in Faith parish under the pastoral care of the Bishop of Beverley.

**The building:** I drove past the church a couple of times before I realised that this nondescript brick built building with cement decoration around the windows was the church of St Paul, Croxteth, complete with security wire over the windows and razor wire on top of the walls. An unassuming building, it is bordered by a neat beech hedge and tidy litter-free grounds. St Paul's was built in 1957. Simple in style, it resembles a meeting hall, complete with tin receptacle by the door for dog ends. Good idea! I stubbed out my own fag and went in. The red painted door led into the porch. Everything is diminutive in here in keeping with the size of the building: miniature stations of the cross, small font, veiled tabernacle, "big six", delightful oil painting (the Adoration of the Magi). A statue of St Paul, adorned with red, gold and white chrysanthemums and carnations, and flanked by candles, looked benevolently down from his vantage point in the sanctuary. A dividing wooden screen at the rear of the church can be pulled back to provide extra space for the function room beyond.



**The church:** It felt well used on this occasion. However, I am told that they do not normally have a very big congregation on an ordinary Sunday. Today's congregation had been drawn from far-flung corners of the diocese and beyond. They were bussing them in by the coach loads; a contingent travelled in from Lancashire. Some had travelled from as far as London!

**The neighbourhood:** Croxteth is part of the conurbation of Liverpool and lies approximately eight miles from the city centre. The church is slap bang in the middle of a 1950s/1960s council estate. The streets have interesting names hereabouts: Sceptre Road, Orb Close, Unicorn Road, Dragon Close, Regal Road. There are a great many "sleeping policemen" (traffic calming devices), no doubt to deter the local yob ("boy" spelt backwards – a rude, obnoxious hoodlum) community from tear-arsing around, "burning rubber." I was warned: "Oh, Croxteth! Wouldn't go there!" It was, however, very quiet on that cold Saturday afternoon – and upon returning to my car I didn't find it burned out on waste land with the wheels missing! Truth be told, the estate is well kept and tidy, and the houses seem in good repair. Croxteth boasts a community library, a leisure centre, and a row of shops that include a chemist, bakery, and public house (the Obster – initial letter L missing).

**The cast:** The Revd Ian George Brooks, parish priest. He has been here for over 25 years (according to Crockfords) and is a Londoner with a voice reminiscent of the late actor and comedian "Professor" Stanley Unwin. There were nine other concelebrants. The Revd Ged Callacher, one of the clergy at the RC Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool, was the preacher. A goodly contingent of clerics had gathered for today's festivities. There were also three servers and an MC sporting a white dicky bow. Lacy cottas were de rigueur.

**The date & time:** Eve of the Solemnity of the Conversion of St Paul, Saturday, 24 January 2015, 12.00pm (within the octave of Prayer for Christian Unity).

**What was the name of the service?**

Solemn Concelebrated Mass.

**How full was the building?**

Exceptionally full, with a few seats remaining at the front.

**Did anyone welcome you personally?**

I was not sure where the entrance was, but a lady having a ciggie in the gardens gestured me toward the entrance porch, on which is found a lovely Pieta. Pushing the door open, I discovered I was at the "business end" of the building, hard on the altar, and was immediately confronted by a sea of interested faces. Taped music was playing, a choral anthem. A general hubbub of expectancy. I bowed to the altar and took my place near one of the few remaining chairs by the altar rails. I buried my head in my hands in humble supplication; a light tap on the shoulder made me turn to see a young man welcoming me with open arms. Also, the chap next to me in a yellow oilskin jacket greeted me like a long-lost uncle.



**Was your pew comfortable?**

Very comfortable. Definitely designed for comfort – modern light-oak chairs with brick-red padded seat and back rest. Matching tweed effect kneeler. Compartment for books.

**How would you describe the pre-service atmosphere?**

There were a lot of men at this service, all quietly talking in subdued tones. But then the bell rang and we were under starter's orders: "Let us proceed in peace," and we were off! The pianist, who

could have passed for Liberace reincarnated, struck up the opening bars of the processional hymn, "Faith of our Fathers." The singing was deafening and rousing; the whole of Croxteth must have heard it! The altar party gently swayed their way up the centre of the nave and took their places in the sanctuary. Dense clouds of holy smoke billowed round the altar. It's a long time since I had seen so many birettas.

**What were the exact opening words of the service?**

"Let us proceed in peace."

**What books did the congregation use during the service?**

Printed order of service containing everything we need to know: prayers, hymns, readings, interspersed with drawings and pictures.

**What musical instruments were played?**

Grand piano and small portable keyboard (connected to the PA system) worked very well. Backing music on CDs during the quiet bits: at times there was full choir participation, courtesy of Guildford Cathedral men and boys.

**Did anything distract you?**

One of the old priests in the sanctuary kept giving me the glad eye, or so it seemed. So I practised custody of the eyes.

**Was the worship stiff-upper-lip, happy clappy, or what?**

Anglo-Chocolate, but not falling off the top of the candle. Sincere, honest and true. It is kindly, reverential and well meant. Father Brooks has taught his little flock very well.

**Exactly how long was the sermon?**

12 minutes.

**On a scale of 1-10, how good was the preacher?**

8 – Father Ged used notes and had an easy style of preaching, more like talking to us.

**In a nutshell, what was the sermon about?**

The test of faith and little acts of kindness. Once a priest, always a priest. Even if you've blotted your copy book, God always gives you another chance. It's the same for us all. So turn before you burn! With God there is always the opportunity for a fresh start!

**Which part of the service was like being in heaven?**

I did enjoy the music, and the prayers were lovely.

**And which part was like being in... er... the other place?**

Folks whose knees aren't what they used to be may have a little trouble getting up from communion, as the altar rail seemed a bit low to offer much support for getting up easily.



**What happened when you hung around after the service looking lost?**

All the visitors were warmly welcomed to the parish party after mass. I was indeed ready for this. I had a quick freshen-up, and then I was in there with the rest of them.

**How would you describe the after-service coffee?**

The dividing screen had been rolled across to reveal a bar plus trestle tables laden with food, enough to feed an army. Hot and cold buffet: the hot comprising sweet and sour chicken, rice, baked potatoes, chips, barbecued spare ribs, spicy chicken wings, cottage pie; and the cold laden with assorted sandwiches with crusts removed, quiches, sausage rolls, cheese boards and biscuits, coleslaw, devilled eggs, salads, crusty French bread, pate. After such a Bacchanalia, sweets seemed almost like an afterthought – but there were pies and pastries, puddings galore: lemon meringue pie, strawberry flan, raspberry trifle with fresh cream, chocolate torte, iced fairy cakes. And everything could be washed down with wine (red and white), local beer from the Frodsham brewery, soft drinks, tea and coffee. The tea had all run out so I had a pint of beer instead, which went "straight to me 'ead," I'm afraid. I sampled a little bit of everything foodwise, and tucked a couple of baked potatoes into my pocket to take home. St Paul's, Croxteth, certainly does not stint on its hospitality: a feast fit for a king (or queen). And, what's more, we were entertained by a jazz band throughout the meal. An afternoon of festal feasting and fun! It'll go down in the annals of history!

**How would you feel about making this church your regular (where 10 = ecstatic, 0 = terminal)?**

9 – St Paul's, Croxteth, is sincere, homely, kindly, and a credit to those who minister and worship here and whose spiritual home it is. It refreshes the parts that other churches cannot. St Paul's is indeed a little gem! I wondered whether the good people of Croxteth are aware that this is their very own sacred space.



**Did the service make you feel glad to be a Christian?**

Yes, because they epitomise the Christian message.

**What one thing will you remember about all this in seven days' time?**

Singing "Faith of our Fathers" and raising the roof!