

Patrick Maguire - How the Catholic Church Shaped Andy Burnham

Catholicism defined the home, the school and the streets where the new MP grew up. It moulded the view that this former altar boy would take into Downing Street



Andy Burnham lights a candle in Manchester Cathedral after the Queen's death in 2022

Years ago, a younger, upwardly mobile version of Andy Burnham liked to explain himself to interviewers with a neat little tricolon. There were three institutions that made him, shaped him — meant something to him. They were Everton Football Club, the Labour Party and the Catholic Church. “In that order.”

Three weeks ago, as we sat watching Wigan Warriors win the Challenge Cup in the beer garden of the old Labour club at Stubshaw Cross his by-election victory has made famous, I heard Burnham quote that line again, a little wistfully: “I always used to say ...”

It had come to mind after I told him something similar that an old boy from the area had told me: that Makerfield's towns were built by the Labour Party, the church and rugby league. Now they only bothered with league.

Burnham and I spoke about that and the Labour Party at length. We did not dwell on the church. But I left, heading for the M6, and I was reminded that the old boy's word “built” had been meant literally. Next door to Burnham HQ was St Wilfrid's Church. The focal point of Ashton's high street is the Sir Thomas Gerard, a Wetherspoons pub named in honour of a recusant patriarch.

Come off the motorway and drive into town, as I did countless times over the course of the campaign, and an outsider really knows they have hit Ashton once they pass St Oswald's Catholic Club. It was not only what I kept seeing, it was what I kept hearing. Burnham and Robert Kenyon, Nigel Farage's plumber, spoke endlessly of “Eddie Arrow's”, by which they meant St Edmund Arrowsmith, the

Catholic secondary school that Burnham's three children and the Reform UK candidate had all attended.

What is left of St Edmund himself is kept in a glass jar in the church that bears both his name and that of St Oswald, just over the Liverpool Road from the Catholic club. It's his right hand, all black and grey and desiccated now. The rest of Arrowsmith, a Jesuit priest born in nearby Haydock, was hanged, drawn and quartered before a bloodthirsty crowd in Lancaster in 1628.

For years he had administered Mass from the wardrobes of families who felt compelled to practise their faith in secret and lived to tell the tale, but in the end he was undone by the treachery of a man who had sought his counsel after marrying a cousin. Arrowsmith died defiant. "Be witnesses with me that I die a constant Roman Catholic and for Christ's sake," he said after his sentence was handed down. "Let my death be an encouragement to your going forward in the Catholic religion." And so they did. He could not have imagined that Catholic schools in England, funded by the state, would one day bear his name. No Catholic priest executed for their religious beliefs would possibly believe it. Nor that the King's first minister would one day be a cradle Catholic from the Lancashire he knew so well.

It is not strictly true to say that Andy Burnham will be our first Catholic prime minister. That distinction, absurdly, belongs to Boris Johnson — baptised Catholic, confirmed as an Anglican, married on the third go in Westminster Cathedral. Sir Tony Blair converted almost the minute he left Downing Street in 2007. But neither man was made by it. Blair did not arrive at Labourism via Catholicism.

Burnham, however, has described it all as irresistible. "I've always said — and some people won't like this," he said in 2012, as shadow health secretary, "that what I used to have to read in the catechism, the enfranchisement of it on Earth was the Labour Party." He had no choice but to be Labour because he was born a Catholic, and the son of a Liverpool Catholic who was reared and came to political consciousness in the 1980s at that.

When the new MP for Makerfield talks of place-first politics, it is not merely a slogan or post-devolution babble. The underexamined and misunderstood brand of Labour politics — and the style that so persistently rubbed Westminster up the wrong way — was shaped by the Catholic Church and churchmen of the 1980s as much as anything else.

And, as he told the broadcaster James O'Brien in 2022, his teachers too: "When I was at those Catholic schools ... the vast majority of the staff were kind of Labour-leaning people and encouraged me in that direction."

Burnham's father, Roy, was notionally Protestant but not religious: his allegiance to Everton was more important to his in-laws. It was from his mother, Eileen — from Irish stock, as the name would imply — that the younger Burnham inherited the faith in which he was raised.

He and Eileen shared, he said during his 2010 leadership campaign, an "unshowy" Catholicism. "I am like her in that, to use a Scouse phrase, we don't lick the altar steps." Burnham's mother begged to differ in a 2015 interview with the Daily Mirror: "You should have seen the fights he and his brothers had on Sundays. They were all altar boys but Andy had to be the one at the front holding the Communion plate."

But the church was almost everywhere. And almost everywhere, in those days in Merseyside and its environs — Burnham's childhood was spent in Culcheth, near Warrington in Cheshire — was the church. It was, of course, their mother's prized porcelain nun the Burnham brothers broke with an errant football, much to her chagrin. Even Merseyside's best pop was Catholic.

Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark sang more than once of Joan of Arc and of little Catholic girls who'd fallen in love; Pete Dinklage's last real hit was a song called *Sinful*, which he performed on *Top of*

the Pops with a troupe of dancing nuns whom John Peel dubbed the Little Sisters of the Anfield Road End.

The recordings that most influenced the politics of the young Burnham, however, carried the voice of Archbishop of Liverpool Derek Worlock, who did as much if not more to shape his city's leftish sense of self than its other Derek: Hatton, of Militant. Andy Burnham was an altar boy who pressed "play" on the tapes, which were of sermons recorded for the benefit of smaller parishes in little towns like Burnham's — in little towns like the ones he now represents in Makerfield.

Worlock was not so much the dangerous liberal his critics in government and in Rome believed him to be, despite his doomed attempts to convince the Vatican to relax its edict on contraception for married couples and to allow gluten-free communion wafers. He knew and loved his laity, warts and all, and believed the urban working class needed its own style of humane ministry.

In that spirit he became so close to his Anglican counterpart Bishop David Sheppard that the two in effect undid the English Reformation in one city. And it was Worlock who took to the steps of Liverpool's Catholic Cathedral to preach to 6,000 shellshocked Scousers the day after the Hillsborough disaster.

Worlock became a whipping boy for the Police Federation after the Toxteth riots of 1981. They accused him of putting perpetrator before victim with offers of legal aid and criticism of Margaret Thatcher. When Pope John Paul II visited in 1982, Worlock sent the Vatican motorcade (for timekeeping reasons, he insisted) through the Liverpool 8 district and the scene of the devastation. He sought unsuccessfully to mediate in the miners' strike of 1984 — the Liverpool archdiocese covered the Catholic parishes that served the pitmen and pit wives of St Helens and Wigan.

"I can pray for [my neighbour's] soul, but I cannot turn my back on how he is to live: his wellbeing, his freedom, his prosperity or poverty, his house, his job and so on," Worlock said at the height of his fame. "All that lies in the field of politics, whether I like it or not. So it is part of my double commitment, to God and neighbour."

A direct link with Labour values

The young Burnham, who took Michael as his confirmation name, watched and listened with a kind of awed reverence. "There was, and still is, a direct read-across between what I was learning at school and church and Labour values," he has said. "And also, what I was seeing then, in the mid-Eighties — how people were being treated — wasn't an expression of Christian values."

The church he knew was compassionate, forgiving, even irreverent. He read the catechism, listened to Worlock, saw the miners striking outside the pit at Golborne (where he still lives), watched Yasser Hughes lose his mind in Alan Bleasdale's *Boys from the Blackstuff*, saw the devastation wrought by the city's decline on the north Liverpool streets around his secular church, Goodison Park.

And so his two religions, the Catholic and the Evertonian, begot the party politics. "I've always felt that there's a connection between the three in terms of identity and that's about the underdog, a sense of solidarity, and values," he said in 2010. It also manifested itself in the half-and-half Everton and Celtic ski hat he wore for a period as a teen.

Understand this and the Burnham of Makerfield does not seem like a performance by a cynical Cambridge-educated special adviser. It looks and sounds much more like the altar boy, pained and sincere and reared in the kind of Catholic community where, as one old friend jokes, "if you kick one, they all limp". It was a practical faith, a culture — a word Burnham and I discussed at length last month, for he believes London Labour's prevailing culture has precious little in common with the ordinary families watching rugby league in front of us — that put a romantic class solidarity before theology.

Joe Gormley, still the most celebrated leader of the National Union of Mineworkers, explained it well in his memoir, *Battered Cherub*. Gormley was himself from Ashton-in-Makerfield and defended himself — and his hard-drinking pit mates — from charges of sin. “I don’t believe you have to go to church every Sunday to be a good, or even a religious, person.”

Indeed, Burnham — unlike, say, Tony Blair, who seeks out Catholic chapels even when travelling abroad — is only an occasional Mass-goer. “It’s about identity,” that old friend adds. “It’s not about whether you’ve read the latest encyclical.” Indeed, the encyclical that best speaks to Burnham’s relationship with his faith, Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, the basis for the Catholic social teaching with which he has so strongly identified in the past, was published in 1891.

Since then, only Worlock and Pope Francis, whom Burnham met in the Vatican in 2023, really matter. Having been sharply critical of Pope Benedict’s prescriptive approach to theology and questions of identity, Burnham praised his successor as a leader who “spoke for equality and compassion and for humanity, in a world where we see political leaders target minorities and marginalise people in the search for votes”.

He gave Francis a Manchester United shirt signed by Lisandro Martinez, a fellow Argentine, and spoke to him of his work to end rough sleeping in Manchester. Of that conversation he proudly told the BBC: “He nodded vigorously, as if to say, ‘Carry on with that, we want more of that’.”

Faith that comes from experience

What more can we expect from our first true Catholic prime minister in Downing Street? Not, as Burnham’s repeated criticism of the Church’s “austere and judgmental” record on gay rights make clear, any semblance of conservatism on questions of sexuality. Unlike other Catholic cabinet ministers under Blair and Brown, such as Ruth Kelly, a member of Opus Dei who was absent for most votes on New Labour’s liberalisation of gay rights, Burnham voted for the big-ticket social reforms introduced by those governments.

He did not back a bid to cut the abortion time limit in 2008, but he voted unsuccessfully to preserve the “need for a father” when same-sex couples conceived by IVF. He questioned the Assisted Dying Bill brought before the Commons by Labour’s Kim Leadbeater last year but not on principle: instead, he worried about underfunded hospices. Again, to the extent that his faith was brought to bear, it was through experience and not theological abstraction. This is not the kind of Catholicism that now holds so much sway in Washington, worn heavily and traditionally, often book-learned by converts, as it is in pockets of the British radical right.

But it belongs to Burnham and, if you take a walk through Ashton or read the name of the rugby league club next door to the tough housing estate of Worsley Mesnes, you will see it once belonged to Makerfield too. In one constituency is the entire troubled, class-conscious history of Catholicism in the north: the recusants who strove, often suicidally, to resist London’s authority; the waves of immigrants, most of them Irish — like Burnham’s great-grandparents — who found themselves impoverished and struggling for individual and collective dignity.

They eventually found its expression through the Labour Party, which owed its hold on the working class neither to Methodism nor to Marx but to the poor of every non-conformist faith. That world is gone but its descendants and values remain.

Burnham, really, is a believer in these people, in a vision and values of community, rather than God alone. Once he is sworn back into the Commons on the Jerusalem Bible on Monday, he will have the fleeting opportunity to make the Labour Party theirs again. Just as they did in the 18th century, when pilgrims walked for miles to touch the linen bag that held the hand of Edmund Arrowsmith, they hope Keir Starmer’s new Catholic martyr can provide his own miracle cure.

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