

Pandemics, Paris and the Passionists, a century ago and today by Tom Heneghan in Paris

Sir Mark Sykes, a brush with history at St. Joseph's, 1919

Most Catholic parishes are defined by geography, bringing together the faithful in a whole village or a certain part of a big city. The boundaries of St. Joseph's Church in Paris are linguistic. It is open to all Catholics in Paris who want to worship in English. They can be long-time residents or weekend tourists, French or foreign. The doors of the "Anglophone mission", led by Passionist priests of Saint Patrick's Province of Ireland and Scotland, are open to all.

This brings with it a turnover many traditional parishes would find dizzying. St. Joseph's has about 2,000 regular members from 40 different countries. One-third of them arrive or leave every summer as expatriate families start or end the Paris years of their wandering existence. On most Sundays, tourists, traders and diplomats visiting Paris also turn up unexpectedly. The result is a kaleidoscope of worshippers, coming and going as they have since St. Joseph's opened up here in 1869.

The church's address at 50 Avenue Hoche, just minutes away from the Champs Élysées and the Arc de Triomphe, has also put it at a secular crossroads. Being in central Paris has placed it at the heart of historic events here, from the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-1871 to the "Yellow Vests" street protests of 2018-2019. This multitude of connections persuaded me to start writing a history of the parish, a work that's still underway.

One such connection, which first seemed worth only a paragraph or two in the book, has grown in significance thanks to the coronavirus pandemic that has swept across the world. One of my first discoveries when I started researching St. Joseph's archives was the text of the sermon given at the February 1919 funeral of Sir Mark Sykes. This British diplomat went down in history as co-author of the secret British-French deal called the Sykes-Picot agreement, which was meant to carve up the Middle East after World War One. He caught the Spanish flu while at the post-World War One, 1919 Paris Peace Conference, quickly died and was given a requiem Mass at St. Joseph's before his body was sent back to England for burial.

The Sykes story presents all the fascinating stories and knotty problems that emerge when writing a book like this. The archives at St. Joseph's and in Passionist centers in London, Dublin and Rome are exhaustive on some questions and silent on others. The priests were supposed to keep house chronicles, but did not always do this regularly. But because it's located right in central Paris, St. Joseph's ends up being reported on in the local press and getting cameo roles in all kinds of books. At least some pieces of the puzzle can be put together.

The only remaining link we have between Sir Mark Sykes, this soldier-diplomat-parliamentarian, and St. Joseph's is the three-page text of that sermon. It's possible he attended Sunday Mass at St. Joseph's on February 9, since newspaper reports had him there during the previous week and we know he was a devout practicing Catholic. But we have no record of that. It's also not clear if he ever called the Passionists for the last rites, as Oscar Wilde had done just before his death in Paris in 1900. Maybe it all went so quickly that there simply was no time. Still, researching his story brought out more about St. Joseph's at the time and the way Paris reacted to the Spanish flu.

Sykes was the only son of a baron in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Educated at Cambridge, he travelled from a young age, especially in the Middle East, and rose in the military as a specialist in that region. He was only 32 when he was elected to Parliament from the city of Hull. In 1916, he and French diplomat François Georges-Picot drew up the famous secret plan for Britain and France to carve up the region. Less known is the fact he also designed the flag of the Arab Revolt, a banner

of green, red, black and white that spawned the later flags of eight Arab countries and the Palestinian movement. At the same time, he also championed the 1917 Balfour Declaration supporting the idea of a Jewish state.

After the Ottoman Empire was defeated, Sykes was named to the British delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. In late 1918, on his way to visit those regions, he stopped on the way in Rome for talks with Vatican officials and a High Mass in the Sistine Chapel. He noted in passing in a letter to his wife that “the flu is awful here”, and soon left by ship for the Middle East. Amid talks with British and local officials in Jerusalem, he managed to squeeze in a quick visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. He then spent weeks in Aleppo trying to bring some order to a confusing situation.

It was in Aleppo that Sykes caught a virus and could not hold down solid food for three weeks. When he finally boarded a ship in Haifa en route to Europe in January 1919, a colleague found him “thin and worn”. It sounds like he had what today would be called an underlying medical condition even before he left for Europe. Meeting soon afterward in Paris, the Zionist leader Nahum Sokolow found Sykes “the same lovable fellow, full of life and humor, but now frightfully thin ... he had suffered much from digestive trouble.”

Sir Mark Sykes, An Untimely Death, 1919

Edith Sykes joined her husband in Paris in early February 1919 and soon came down with the flu herself. She stayed behind at the Hotel Lotti, near the Place Vendôme, when Sykes went to the opera with friends on Feb. 10. But, as his grandson Christopher Simon Sykes later wrote, “Mark’s bonhomie that night had masked a fearful truth. ‘I’ve got it,’ he told his faithful secretary, Walter Wilson, as he went to bed.” His wife tried to nurse him with Bovril, Oxo and patent medicines, but his flu developed into full-blown pneumonia, and she sent for a doctor from England. He arrived too late. Sykes died on the evening of February 16, 1919 a month before his 40th birthday.

The main document in Passionist archives for this period is a typescript entitled “A Brief Record of the Mission of St. Joseph’s Church, 50 Avenue Hoche, Paris, from 1903 to 1924”. Several of these anonymous typescripts appear in different archives recounting certain periods of the parish’s history. They seem to be taken from house chronicles but often the originals have since gone missing. In this case, the document mentioned neither Sykes nor the Spanish flu, even though the parish could not have ignored the pandemic outside its doors. The typescript noted that the three Passionists at the church during the war had become Red Cross chaplains and were quite busy tending to Catholic soldiers in the hospitals and camps near Paris. Air raids and the German “Big Bertha” artillery kept city residents on their toes, it also remarked. At the end of the war, however, the 15-page summary jumps to scattered news bits from the early 1920s, and then stops.

With so many French, British, Irish and American newspaper archives now online, contemporary accounts of Paris as the pandemic raged are easy to access. The Spanish flu killed about 50 million people around the world in 1918-1919, many more than about 15 million soldiers and civilians killed in the First World War that was ending as the pandemic began. As accounts in the newspapers show, it was badly understood at the time and poorly reported as it swept over France in three waves.

The first thing that stands out is that the French capital did not lock down during the pandemic. Announcements in the Paris edition of the *New York Herald* showed restaurants, theaters and other public places stayed open during the whole flu period. Saint Joseph’s was regularly listed there among all the options for English-language Sunday worship in Paris, offering five masses and an afternoon rosary service.

St. Joseph's Parish, 2020

By contrast, when the coronavirus hit Paris this year the city imposed a strict lockdown and banned public gatherings including religious services. Fr. Aidan Troy C.P., the superior, and visiting former superior Fr. Pat Fitzgerald C.P. said Mass daily in an empty church, followed by parishioners who watched them on its YouTube channel. Catechism, Bible study and other groups continued their work through Zoom conferences online.

While funerals with a maximum of 20 participants have been allowed, a full requiem Mass like that for Sykes would not be possible under today's lockdown. France first loosened its strict guidelines on May 11, 2020 but the ban on religious services remained. The second phase of *déconfinement*, as they call the reopening here, came on June 2 but pressure from the churches meant they were allowed to reopen a bit earlier. But all churches, mosques and synagogues have to allow a limited number of participants, observe social distancing, require masks and take other sanitary precautions.

This means St. Joseph's, which can welcome almost 400 people in normal times, now allows in only about 70 people who have to reserve their seats in advance. There is organ music but no singing. At communion time, the priest — wearing a full-face clear plastic shield — walks through the empty pews to distribute communion to parishioners scattered in every other row. The YouTube transmissions have continued and parishioners are encouraged to watch it if they for whatever reason cannot attend Mass that Sunday.

The exercise is made more complicated by the fact the church is at basement level, with only two small doors for an entrance at ground level. The 1980s structure, which had to be built when the original St. Joseph's became unstable, put the church below ground to make room for office space needed to help finance the reconstruction. That same formula that helped St. Joseph's continue back then now creates hurdles for it on reopening. Mass would be easier to organize in a ground-level church with several entrances and exits. (Below is St. Joseph's Parish, Paris, pre-Covid, 2019)



Spanish Flu in Paris, 1918-1919

Knowing what we know now, it's also clear from the reporting back then that the pandemic was underestimated. The flu appeared in France in April 1918 and quickly spread among Allied troops in the frontline trenches. Military censors and the blizzard of reports about the war relegated the pandemic to second or third rate status in the news of the day. When alarming uncensored reports about it came in late May from the non-combatant country of Spain, the nickname "Spanish flu" was born. In fact, it may have actually come from France or the United States.

The pandemic's first wave seemed to slow down in July, but in August it roared back stronger than before. French newspapers still played down its strength at home, but showed less caution when describing the disease's progress in Britain or in Germany. It wasn't until October 1918, when it was clear that Paris hospitals were getting overwhelmed by the infected, that the drama became

daily news. Health authorities wanted to shut down public places like theaters, but the powerful prefects around the country blocked this, fearing popular opposition. Instead, articles in the press simply advised readers to wear face masks, keep their distance and avoid churches, cinemas, theaters and department stores. Some people did, some didn't. Meanwhile, advertisements for all kinds of supposed cures for influenza cluttered the classified sections.

The flu didn't really go away, though. Newspaper archives tell us that Don Martin, the *New York Herald's* correspondent with American troops in France, caught the Spanish flu and died in early October 1918. Laurence Jerrold, Paris correspondent for London's *Daily Telegraph*, followed him in early November. Both were only 45. Around the same time, a senior French health official ordered all hospital to isolate all flu patients and equip doctors and nurses with face masks. On October 25, the Paris *New York Herald* headlined a story "Spanish grippe is nearly universal at present time", using the French word for influenza. "At this time of the year, the usual death rate in Paris is 721 (per week). Last week, 1,944 deaths were reported and of this number, 880 were attributed to grippe, the kind almost universally called Spanish." Another 202 deaths were attributed to bronchial pneumonia, it said, making a distinction possibly not based on a difference.

By November, 1918 the second wave seemed to wane. "The flu has been routed, like the Boches," the daily *Le Journal* trumpeted days after the Germans surrendered. The Paris *New York Herald* saw several reasons why the pandemic had faded from the press. "One was that the capitulation of Turkey and the revolution in Austria-Hungary overshadowed all other events in newspaper importance," it wrote on Nov. 2. "Another was that the majority of Paris dailies were limited to two pages. A third was that 'pneumonia following on influenza' is now more often registered on death certificates than *grippe*." By mid-December, the Paris correspondent for *The Times* in London wrote "the city is lively ... Christmas shopping is again taking on some of its old charm."

The third wave of the pandemic struck in February 1919. "The flu epidemic that seemed to have been stopped ... is beginning to become worrying again," *Le Petit Journal* wrote on February 16, the day that Sykes died. Hospitals were filling up again, it said. Two days later, it turned up the volume: "The flu is becoming threatening again."

Sir Mark Sykes, news accounts of his death, 1919

Initial reports of his death mistakenly said Sykes had been in good health. "The news came as a great shock; its unexpectedness fell with the force of a stunning blow," his hometown newspaper, the *Hull Daily Mail*, wrote of its M.P. on February 17. The following day, the same daily wrote that Sykes could have become foreign secretary one day. "Even the premiership might have been within his grasp," its London correspondent wrote. Back in Paris, the *New York Herald* reported anxiety among doctors and "some alarm" among the public. "In fact, something approaching a 'scare' has arisen."

That was the atmosphere as family, friends and diplomats from Britain and several allied nations gathered in St. Joseph's for the requiem Mass before Sykes's coffin was sent back home. During the service, probably presided by the local Passionist Superior, the sermon noted Sykes "had scarcely reached the prime of his magnificent career. His future seemed to portend wonderful possibilities of distinguished talent dedicated to the service of his country which he loved so much ... He has gone, his career has sped like the passing of a brilliant meteor. All things that life can give are transient, nothing abides but God and the soul".

The priest noted that Sykes "had just returned from Syria, where he had endured many privations which made him an easy victim of the prevalent epidemic". In conclusion, he said: "He bore the heat and burden of the day in the days when the heat was greatest and the burden heaviest. Now his life's work is ended. He has gone to God and with him it is well."

The next day, the Paris *New York Herald* ran a short items about Sykes's funeral. "There was a large gathering, representing all countries," it said, including the British ambassador Lord Derby. His remains were sent back to his estate at Sledmere for burial in the local churchyard.

The decades since his death have not been kind to Sykes, mostly because of his role in the secret deal meant to carve up the Middle East for the colonial powers Britain and France. Parts of it were already outdated by the time he got to Paris. The states that did emerge in the Middle East mostly had borders different from the lines he and Picot had drawn in the sand. But the agreement reflected the aim of the two colonial empires to dominate the evolving Middle East. It influenced the creation of artificial states whose boundaries became a corset hemming in fragile societies and competing groups. Successive generations of Arab nationalist leaders chafed under the unnatural frontiers they inherited, but could not change them. In 2014, after the radical Islamic State movement created its own theocratic nation spanning both Syrian and Iraqi territory, its Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi vowed to keep expanding "until we hit the last nail in the coffin of the Sykes-Picot conspiracy". That project collapsed in 2019, a century after Sykes's death.

Sir Mark Sykes, another soul who passed through St. Joseph's, 1919

As for St. Joseph's, the funeral Mass on that chilly February 1919 morning was just one of the many encounters the church has had with the history of Paris. Sometimes outside events have imposed themselves, such as the artillery shell during the Paris Commune fighting in May 1871 that frightened the congregation at morning Mass. It smashed through one window, whizzed across the church and exited through another window. During the Belle Epoque, there were society weddings, operatic liturgies and visits by exiled royals and wealthy merchants. Heating was sparse and collections low during the Depression. During World War Two, the German occupiers used the church for Mass for their Catholic soldiers, unaware that a friendly priest and parishioner there, both Irish, were quietly helping the Resistance behind their backs. The postwar era saw a new church, opened in 1987, and the gradual internationalization of the congregation to its current multicultural identity. Despite all these changes and challenges, it remains what it has always been — the parish for English-speaking Catholics in Paris.

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