



Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time February 1, 2015 B

Are you a “Cafeteria Catholic”?

I am sure you have heard the term “cafeteria Catholic,” that is, one who picks and chooses what he/she wants to believe and embrace in Catholic teachings and practices.

The following article on this topic, written by Isabella Moyer, is in the February 2015 issue of US Catholic magazine. It is quite interesting so I hope you will take time to read it.

I once found great comfort in the black-and-white world of apologetics. The Catechism of the Catholic Church provided the answers to all of my questions concerning faith and morals. It was the definitive voice of the church, and I believed everything that voice said. And then my black-and-white world began to fall apart.

Dysfunctional leadership at the local and diocesan levels left me questioning my place in the church and its place in my life. Disillusionment with the institutional church brought on a dark night of the soul for me, and previous certainties vaporized in clouds of doubt. This forced me to dig deeper into the core of my faith. What do I believe? Why do I believe it? How can I regain the joy in my belief when I am feeling so much pain and unease within the four walls of my church?

During this time of painful exile, a Benedictine friend introduced me to the lectio divina form of prayer. I began to listen for the Word of God speaking to me personally in the scriptures. I slowly learned to balance the knowledge of the mind with the emotions of the heart, for we need both. Our faith is neither solely about black-and-white pronouncements, nor is it simply about warm, fuzzy feelings. It is about knowing what we believe, loving what we believe, and putting that belief into concrete action in the messiness of everyday life.

It is also about acknowledging that faith is a lifelong journey. We will often find ourselves struggling with some aspect of our belief or unable to live up to the high standards set before us. Sometimes we know what the church teaches but still do not understand or accept the reasoning behind a specific teaching. The answer of “because the church says so” can be as ineffective as a parent’s “because I said so.”

Today, the accusation of being a “cafeteria Catholic” is flung around with the same zealotry as the term “heretic” was at one time. Passionate traditionalists troll online discussion boards and blogs seeking to attack women and men who do not give their full assent to each and every teaching of the Catholic Church.

These self-appointed gatekeepers of orthodoxy believe it is for the glory of God and the good of the church that all questioners be denounced and told if they don’t like it they can—and should—leave.

I have no desire to be part of the smaller, purer church envisioned by these doctrinal police. The church must keep its doors open for all of us who are on an imperfect, bumpy, and often messy journey toward holiness.

As a writer, I have been the object of some mean-spirited attacks online. I once wrote an article questioning the derogatory use of the term “cafeteria Catholics,” stating that in some ways we all pick and choose from the great buffet table of Catholicism.

Several months later I discovered that I had been personally attacked on some Catholic blogs. My words were taken out of context, and I was denounced as a “militant atheist” who “spread calumny and false witness” and believed that we are all “irrational animals.”

I tried to shrug it off, but I had to admit that the attacks upset me. These people knew nothing about me, my relationship to the church, or my personal faith life. Nevertheless, based on a few written words of mine, they had labeled me a heretic and dissenter.

In the Middle Ages, the church attempted to keep its purity by aggressively cleansing the ranks of all traces of unorthodoxy. Inquisitors enforced loyalty oaths and sent spies to sniff out the slightest odor of heresy from pulpits, pews, and backstreets.

It was a time of malicious accusations, unjust trials, and raging bonfires. Zealotry for the faith inspired crusader armies to battle heathens in the name of Jesus Christ. It was a time of “if you’re not with us, you’re against us” and, if you are against us, we believe that it is God’s will that you experience the earthly wrath of the church now and eternal damnation in the hereafter.

Here and now in the 21st century, the new evangelization calls us to put aside such a militant defense of the faith. Pope Francis has been reminding us that we must embrace the joy of the gospel message before we can reach out to evangelize others. Freedom of conscience and the dignity of each human person must be respected. We should focus more on true conversion of heart and less on doctrinal purity.

This requires that we dialogue more and proselytize less. This does not mean doctrine isn’t important but that doctrine without love risks becoming small-minded and mean-spirited.

Evangelization calls us, first of all, to a personal relationship with Jesus, the Almighty God, Creator of all, who took on human flesh and became one of us in the person of Jesus. His teaching was simple: God loves you. What does God expect in return? Love God and love others. It seems so simple.

There is one God, but there are many of us. And each of us is different, with different desires and needs. We have different tastes and styles. We think differently. We look different and speak different languages. We even speak the same languages differently.

So what happens when you throw out a couple of simple commandments to a world full of unique souls? Love of God and love of others become mighty complicated. We squabble over liturgies, worship language, and prayer forms. We believe in the same basic commandments but disagree with how they have been interpreted over the years.

For some, moral teachings are black and white and must be accepted with full and unquestioning obedience. Others struggle with the grayness of life's many questions and believe that the answers aren't always clear-cut.

The recent Synod on the Family discussed the concept of graduality, which acknowledges that we are all on a path to wholeness and holiness. None of us are perfect. As we hope for compassion for our own imperfections, we are also called to offer the same compassion to others. If we focus only on seeking the sinfulness in others, we will not see the goodness that is present in them.

Gone are the days of blind, unquestioning obedience. Gone are the days of conversion by fear. Gone are the days of forcing and enforcing beliefs through militant apologetics with the expectation that doctrinal arguments can be ended with a simple catechism quote.

Evangelization today requires a real dialogue, a sharing that seeks to build on the existing good that unites us while trying to better understand that which divides us. It requires speaking from the head and the heart.

The new evangelization calls for a new style of conversation in our church. If we want a model of what this looks like, we need only look to our new pope.

Francis speaks first and foremost from his heart to the hearts of others. He knows that the heart is the privileged depository for true conversion. He speaks of faith less in doctrinal terms of the mind and more in practical works of our hands. He is not afraid to denounce, but he saves his harshest condemnations for those who allow legalities to overshadow compassion or who seek personal glory and comfort before the good of others.

Last July Pope Francis made headlines for joining Vatican workers for lunch in their cafeteria. The cafeteria is a beautiful symbol of what our church community could be like. The church should not be like an elitist restaurant with high-minded hosts zealously guarding the guest list. Invitations to dine should not depend on who we are or who we know. We should not be asked to leave because our manners, dress, or food preferences do not hold up to some exclusive club rules.

We should be a church more like a cafeteria, offering a welcome sense of hospitality to all who seek spiritual nourishment, community, and respite from their worries and labors. But, please, let's not ruin the meal by judging what others have on their trays.

And the survey says . . .

1. I consider myself a cafeteria Catholic.

Agree 50%
Disagree 35%
Other 15%

2. The church needs to purge itself of cafeteria Catholics who don't believe or follow all of its teachings.

Agree 4%
Disagree 88%
Other 8%

3. It simply isn't possible to know, fully understand, and agree with every teaching of the Catholic Church.

Agree 68%
Disagree 19%
Other 13%

4. In order to be a faithful Catholic, a person must:

39% Agree with a set of non-negotiable teachings, but possibly come to his or her own conclusions on other issues.

37% Profess to follow the church's teachings as best they can, even if they question or do not understand some of them.

5% Pick and choose some teachings to follow that are personally meaningful but disregard others.

2% Completely agree with all the church's teachings, without question.

17% Other.

5. If a person disagrees with a particular teaching of the church, he or she should:

58% Stay in the church but try to promote dialogue around the teaching with which they disagree.

28% Try their best to understand and follow the church's teachings.

6% Do nothing, because it is perfectly OK to be Catholic and not follow all church teachings.

1% Leave and go find another church.

7% Other.

6. Wrestling with teachings you don't understand or agree with is a natural part of having faith.

Agree 94%
Disagree 3%
Other 3%

7. The church will attract more people with open dialogue than it will with rigid rules.

Agree 80%
Disagree 8%
Other 12%

8. No one should ever question the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Agree 4%
Disagree 89%
Other 7%

These results are based on survey responses from 445 US Catholic.org visitors.

The best thing for Catholics to do if people disagree with church teachings is ...

Try to understand why the church has taken a position, and then try to get some dialogue going about it.

Kelly Gauthier—Ann Arbor, Mich.

Engage in honest dialogue with others who are also honestly searching for truth in their faith journey.

Donald Ruedinger—Phoenix, Ariz

Look around at Mass and know 90% of those in the pew are in the same predicament. Hang in there!

Kathleen Hockey—Albuquerque, N.M.

The biggest problem with the term “cafeteria Catholic” is . .

It mislabels. All the baptized pick and choose what they emphasize, maybe especially the “traditionalists.”

Edward Gedrich—Brick, N.J.

It denigrates those who are trying to find the truth.

Bob Moore—Germantown, MD.

It is a correct term to describe those who pick and choose moral and dogmatic church teachings according to their personal choices and are not willing to sacrifice for what is morally good.

Bob De Chene—Meadowlakes, Texas

It allows users to write off and dismiss those who disagree with any teaching of the church, cutting off any dialogue.

Barbara Rodts—Leawood, Kan.

It implies that people pick and choose just what suits them. Those who, after careful discernment, decide to disagree with a church teaching are not doing so just because it “suits” them.

Ron Plue—Los Angeles, Calif.

My opinion on people who pick and choose which church teachings to follow is ...

Join the club. Everybody fits this description even if they don't admit it.

Leonel Martinez—Bakersfield, Calif.

Who am I to judge?

Terry Mendenhall—Drexel Hill, PA

They are living a mature faith.

Reyanna Rice—Victor, Mont.

They are intelligent people looking for the truth.

Judy Lovett—Dover, Del.

They need to apply ethical rationales to their process, and if their conscience guides them against a teaching, they should follow their own judgment.

Kathryn Sales—Chicago, Ill.

They may be conscientious, thoughtful people or they may be careless, irresponsible people. It depends on the individual and the reasons behind his or her choices.

Sharon Noble—San Diego, Calif.

They are mostly thoughtful, conscientious, prayerful people who love their church.

Karen Karn—Plymouth, Minn

They have been poorly catechized.

James Boardman—Stevensville, Mich

I do not have an opinion other than to respect the different point of view and continue a dialogue with those people.

Cherie Gaiser—Libertyville, Ill

General comments

If a person has real concerns about certain teachings (like birth control), I think each Catholic has an obligation to question them and if necessary choose an alternate path. However, if it is simply a matter of inconvenience (like attending Sunday Mass), he or she should question the seriousness of his or her beliefs.

Tom O'Connell—Chehalis, Wash

A sense of partial belonging weakens one's commitment to the community overall, to a Catholic Christian way of life, and encourages ignoring rather than grappling with issues.

Clare Colella—San Bernardino, Calif

God endowed us with minds and consciences. The church is my frame of reference, but I look at its teachings through the lens of my mind and conscience.

Patrick Driscoll—Chicago, Ill

Up until recently, only liberal-leaning Catholics have been accused of being cafeteria Catholics. Now that Francis is pope, a lot of conservatives and traditionalists have joined the cafeteria line because they seem to find his message of love and adherence to the gospel confusing. Pity.

Frank Masci—Silver Springs, Md

Most people do not disagree with the teachings of the Trinity, the real presence in the Eucharist, etc. It's the social issues that have torn us apart: birth control, divorce and remarriage, etc. If the disagreement is on the social issues, I don't feel that should exclude people from belonging to the Catholic Church.

Pat Brown—Aliquippa, Pa

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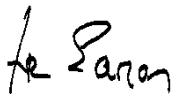
If you would like to share your thoughts on this article, I would love to hear them.

Reflection questions

I have added these questions for your individual or small group use.

- What speaks to you most in the article?
- Where did you find yourself saying “Yes! Yes!” and where did you find yourself disagreeing with the article?
- If you think of yourself as a strict Catholic, do you sometimes find yourself judging “cafeteria Catholics”?
- If you consider yourself a “cafeteria Catholic,” have you seriously looked into the reasons the Church holds a particular belief, or do you tend to just disagree with it without examining the Church’s side of the story?
- Pastorally, do you think it is best for priests to accept people where they are at and then try to lead them to a greater understanding and appreciation of Church beliefs and practices? Yes? No? Give a reason for your answer.
- What spoke to you in the “general comments” section of the article?

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.