

## Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time July 3, 2011 A

### WHY I STAY CATHOLIC?

Recently, I purchased a book titled *Why I Stay Catholic* by Michael Leach, which I plan to read on vacation.

In the following article which appeared in the May edition of *St. Anthony Messenger*, Barbara Beckwith interviewed Leach about the book and other things, including his wife's early Alzheimer's. She writes:

*Why is this semi-retired publisher so high on being Catholic? Michael Leach's Why Stay Catholic? Unexpected Answers to a Life-Changing Question, published by Loyola Press last March, builds on his previous best-seller, I Like Being Catholic, co-edited with Therese J. Borchard. That was a collection of other people's stories, but his new book reveals his incredibly moving and persuasive personal story.*

*Mike, now 70, received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Catholic Book Publishers Association in 2007. This Chicago native, who now lives in Greenwich, Connecticut, was ordained a priest in 1966 but requested and received laicization three years later so that he could marry.*

*Now after 41 years of marriage to Vickie Jacobi, Mike still can't believe his good fortune in finding a woman whose life theme is gratitude. That's true even though seven years ago she was diagnosed with early Alzheimer's. (Mike devotes on the book's chapter to her story and refers to her frequently.)*

*For his first job in the "real" world, Mike turned for advice to Father Andrew Greeley, whom he had met at St. Mary of the Lake Seminary. Mike knew he wanted to work in publishing because "I love books." Back then, Father Greeley was the prolific author of Catholic nonfiction; more recently, he's known for his novels. (Mike devotes a chapter in this book to the priest, now recovering from a head injury.)*

*So Greeley wrote to a number of publishers on Mike's behalf, but no one would hire him because he had no experience. But Mike persevered because "Andy believed in me, and Vickie loved me, so I knocked on every door." Just before his money ran out, he was hired by Seabury Press, owned by the Episcopal Church.*

*The rest, as they say, is history. Mike went on to become the publisher of The Crossroad Publishing*

*Company and later of Orbis Books (both are Catholic publishing houses). He has published thousands of books and still takes the time to encourage young people who want to write and get into publishing.*

*His operational philosophy is what he calls "The Bethlehem Principle," or "There is Room in the Church for Everyone or There is Room for No One" (also a chapter in this book). He thinks too many Catholics fall away from the Church because they think there is no room for them there.*

*For Mike, the Church must embrace those who are hurting, especially those it has hurt: "Would not Jesus, if he were here today, prepare a great room, a family room of enormous comfort, for victims of abuse, for gay and lesbian Catholics, for divorcees, and for Catholic thinkers who seek to shed light but too often receive only heat in return? If there is not room for everyone, the Church is not a home but a country club." Mike sees the Church as a family that should "fill its table to bursting with prodigal sons and daughters."*

*Mike organizes his book into ideas, people and places that keep him centered on the Catholic Church. Ideas such as "The Sacramental Imagination" (Building on one of Greeley's favorite themes), "The Communion of Saints" and the sheer joy of Catholicism ("Benedicamus Domino! Or Catholics Like to Party") come from the deposit of faith. This is the Church's vault of ideas and practices—"so large and deep that no one can withdraw all of its riches in a thousand lifetimes."*

*I've known Mike since we met at a Catholic Press Association meeting back in the 1970's. Our February 4 phone interview ranged from our shared love of theologian/paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin and the Chicago Cubs to the present state of Vickie's health. Mostly, we discussed the areas of light and inspiration in the Church today that he describes in his book.*

### As Simple As 'God Is Love'

**Q. What ideas from the deposit of faith, the Church's attic, if you will, keep you Catholic?**

**A. Treasures from the attic of Catholic consciousness: that's a great phrase, if I may say so. Catholicism is a sacramental religion, full of signs, symbols and metaphors. When we go up into**

**Catholic consciousness, we find that there's no roof. All these beautiful truths are like stars that just go**

forever. The deposit of faith is more than a limited checking account with a few statements that bishops and popes put in. When we look at the spiritual deposit of faith, it's like a trust fund that increases and multiplies. It's filled with all the ideas of saints and sages, mystics, martyrs and laypeople throughout the centuries.

There are all these ideas in Catholic consciousness that are forgotten or ignored. One of them is from the Baltimore Catechism: "God is everywhere."

What is God? We learn from St. John that "God is love. We who live in love live in God and God in us" [see 1 John 4:16b]. St. Paul teaches that we live and move and have our being in this love. We are literally in Love! We are like fish swimming in an ocean of love and we don't even know where we are. Catholicism at its best teaches us to know who and what we are in God and God in us. You could talk forever about that.

I find it curious that rarely does any Catholic talk about that wonderful passage from St. Paul where he says that nothing can separate us from the love of God—not life, not death, not demons, not angels, not even sin [see Romans 8:35].

Pope John Paul II, a great pope, repeated this message from Paul that nothing can separate us from the love of God—not my sins, not your sins, nothing. "It is the foundation of our faith," he said, "the good news." One of the reasons I wanted to write this book was I wanted to talk about these beautiful ideas from the deposit of faith that lift us up.

**Q. You mentioned in the book you were disappointed that the new Catechism of the Catholic Church never mentions that God is omnipresent.**

A. God is everywhere, right. Baltimore Catechism was 62 pages and could blow away in the wind, yet managed to find space for that idea. [The new Catechism] is 1,000 pages, and omnipotence is there half a dozen times and omnipresence only once, I believe. The new Catechism is a wonderful document, but it's heavier than your brain!

What is important is to focus on the spiritual truths that set us free—not statements about the truth.

## Saints to Help Us

**Q. Another idea from the deposit of faith that you mention is the Communion of Saints. What difference do saints make?**

A. That is such a Catholic idea! When I was a kid, we had two kinds of cards: baseball cards and holy cards. They both gave examples of heroes. Catholics believe that we are one with these saints and they are one with us. There is no such thing as death.

Just as we go to the Blessed Mother (because the best

way to someone's son is through the mother), we can also go to these saints for inspiration, for example, and encouragement. That's a great Catholic idea.

**Q. And to find lost things?**

A. And to find lost things! TV comedian Stephen Colbert is a Catholic who goes to Mass every day. He once said, "There are 10,000 saints and someone for everyone." Catholicism is for everyone.

**Q. You give a lot of examples of the saints. What appeals to you about them?**

A. How flawed they were and yet they got through life and into heaven—through their faith, their kindness and their tenacity and by pounding on the door of heaven! Mary was probably flawed, but what was beautiful—and I'll never tire of it—is that she said yes all the time. Yes is one of the most beautiful words. She said yes to God and God blossomed within her.

Perhaps the saint I know and love the most is St. Alphonsus Liguori. He had a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) called a scrupulous conscience. I'm familiar with OCD because even if I see something on TV about an illness I think I have the symptoms. I used to feel very guilty. As a teenager I would go to Confession almost every day. That's not a virtue. That's an illness.

Even though St. Alphonsus wrote about having a thousand frightening fantasies, he prayed to God to help him overcome obsessive-compulsive disorder. He was able to write approximately 100 spiritual books that have inspired people for centuries. He founded the Redemptorist Order. He was a kind, good man. He is an example of a saint who teaches us how to get through life—no matter the obstacles.

**Q. What I like about the idea of the Communion of Saints is that it is not just the saints we know about. It's the saints of our families and friends who we know are in heaven, right?**

A. Yes, and the saints that are still alive. You are absolutely right. That is the beautiful thing about Catholicism.

That is why I divided my book into three parts: ideas, people and places. Everything starts with an idea, but then, the Word gets made flesh. "We are syllables of the one Word," the mystic Caryll Houselander said. The Word of God is made alive in the lives of our families and our friends. Then we see it made manifest in organizations like Catholic Relief Services, in Catholic hospitals, in all the women religious throughout the centuries who have given themselves in hospitals and schools. That is the Communion of Saints, too. We are a part of it. It is wonderful.

## **The Church Can Change**

**Q. Another idea you chose from the deposit of faith is that the Church is both unchangeable and can change. Isn't there a movement nowadays to reverse some of the recent changes?**

*A. The Church has always changed. It's changing now. It's going to change in the future. The Church is 2,000 years old; the human race is three million years old; the universe is 13 billion years old.*

*The Church of today is nothing like the immigrant Church of the early 20th century. And the Church 100 years from now will be nothing like the Church of today. Issues that aren't essential to our faith, like the form of the priesthood, can change in the blink of an eye. What won't change is the spiritual value behind priesthood, which is service for others in the name of Christ.*

**Q. Do you see today's Church going up or down?**

*A. The institution is definitely in decline. But the Church as the People of God, as a community, as the idea that Christ is manifest in the world cannot be thrown out like a baby with the bathwater.*

**Q. What do you think is going to happen to the baby boomers' children?**

*A. They're great kids. My kids [he and Vickie have two sons] are great. For many years I've been looking throughout the country to find new Catholic authors who are in their 20s and 30s. I found them. They are wonderful people. A lot of them don't go to church because the Church turns them off.*

*Yet if you look at these kids, they value kindness, compassion, authenticity, love, devotion. If the Church turns them off, perhaps the Church we encounter on radio and TV and read about in the newspapers is not manifesting these values.*

*I think their parents have already turned them on to these wonderful values. Now it's up to the Church to turn them on. If you want to attract someone, you have to show your attractive side.*

**Q. You mentioned in your book that the family model of community that Hispanics bring might be able to revitalize some of the Church. From where might other sources of energy come?**

*A. You never know which way the Spirit is going to blow. One thing is certain: The Church in the United States is becoming more Hispanic. Nobody has greater family values than Mexican-Americans, people from Mexico, Puerto Rico and all the Latin American countries. Pretty soon, 40 percent of all Catholics [in the United States] will be of Hispanic heritage. They have wonderful values of family and play and festivity*

*and a great love of the Blessed Mother. That is going to be important.*

*Where the next wave of revitalization is coming from, I really have no idea. I have confidence in the goodness of people and that the Church will continue to manifest that.*

## **Our Choices, God's Church**

**Q. What makes you stay so optimistic about the Church?**

*A. It's a choice. You can choose to see the glass half-empty or half-full or just be grateful for the water. I'm grateful for the water.*

**Q. How can you convey your optimism to a generation jaded by unrelenting news of the clergy sex-abuse crisis?**

*A. If you pay attention only to the terrible news stories when you look at the Church, it is like seeing the Mona Lisa without a smile or like touching the Pietà and not feeling the embrace. The only way we can get people to see that is to be that. It's not just talking; we have to embody the values of Catholicism and realize that God is in control—not us, not the Church.*

*Live a cheerful and grateful life. That's all we can do.*

## **Living in the Present Moment**

**Q. The chapter that you wrote about your wife is titled "The Color of Gratitude." How can you and she maintain your celebration in the face of her Alzheimer's?**

*A. We are very blessed to have met each other. I think marriage is a cosmic crapshoot. It depends on who you meet. Then it depends on how you both appreciate each other throughout the journey.*

*Yes, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's seven years ago. What goes in tends to go out pretty quickly, but she knows who she is and who I am and who our kids are. If you met her, you wouldn't even know. We have a wonderful life and every day is a good one.*

*She is the most grateful, happy person that you'll ever meet. When we take a ride in the car, spontaneously from her lips comes, "This is the day the Lord has made! Oh, what a beautiful day! Thank you, God!"*

*She inspires me to be grateful. She lives in the present moment, completely. There's not much past. We dare not think about the future. I live on her clock.*

*When she was a little girl, two years old, she stumbled and fell. Her eye was torn by a glass rabbit that was on the ground. It blinded and somewhat disfigured her eye. All she wished her whole life was to look like everyone else. If she couldn't, she wanted to find a prince who would love her just the way she was.*

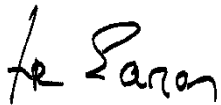
*After we had been married a year, her bad eye needed to be removed. Vickie got an artificial eye and looked like everybody else.*

*Ironically, the last few years of our life have been among the happiest because we are living in that present moment, savoring, tasting, appreciating every moment. She's a wonderful person, the best!*

**Q. In the book you say that gratitude is the memory of the heart. It cannot be erased. Were you talking about her gratitude or yours?**

*A. Both. One of the things I'm learning in this experience labeled Alzheimer's is that emotional memories don't go away. If Vickie has a good day or something wonderful happens, the memory of that stays. She might not remember the event, but she continues to live in happiness every day. I see my job as to nurture her happiness and share in her joy. For me, that's the grace of the present moment.*

**Have a blessed week and  
Happy Fourth of July!**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Le Sarah". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.