

Being Catholic Now

PROMINENT AMERICANS TALK ABOUT CHANGE IN THE CHURCH AND THE QUEST FOR MEANING

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When I was a kid, there were endless arguments that seemed to have no point. Whether it was proper, for example, if my parents went to a wedding in a Methodist church. This always seemed like the “How many angels can dance on a pin?” argument, since we were never invited to weddings that weren’t in Catholic churches. In my entire neighborhood where I grew up there was no one who wasn’t Catholic. No one had married into a family who wasn’t Catholic.

There was a rhythm to the liturgical year, which gave this incredible shape to your life, in a way that had almost nothing to do with faith. It’s like the distinction between the Baltimore Catechism and theology. The Baltimore Catechism gave this knee-jerk shape to every element of Catholicism that was absolutely anti-intellectual and unquestioning, as opposed to real theology. And so much of our lives as young Catholics was about that sort of ruling affirmative: What would happen if you unwittingly took a bite of a bologna sandwich on a Friday? Much of it was the functional equivalent of keeping kosher. Why does one do this? You don’t ask this question, you just do it, unthinkingly, and there is supposed to be a virtue in the unthinking aspect of it, which of course was bound to catch up with me, sooner or later.

Real faith is something that happens later on.

It is the dichotomy that is in the Church today, which is that as an instrument of social justice, nobody does it better; but this is always overshadowed by the “shalt not” pronouncements that seem to have little to do with social justice, human frailty, or real faith. The Church is always in this state of huge dichotomy, when you look back through history, between form and function, between humanity and this rigid hierarchical rule making.

I’m struck by the fact that about 80 percent of what I care about

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politically is also what the Church supports. When I wrote a column in support of both legal and undocumented immigrants, I got a number of e-mail messages of support from priests, which was a first for me in recent years. And there is the zone of gynecological theology, where the Church is totally wrong. For American Catholics, the Church’s stand on birth control or even abortion is, at some level, irrelevant. I’m talking about third-world Catholic women who, when they get pregnant, don’t have an additional child but either die or have a baby who dies. The deep dichotomies of the Church are frustrating to me, especially because it does do so much good.

When our oldest child first described himself as an atheist, he was sixteen, and my husband and I looked at each other and said, “Right on schedule!” Until they went to college, our children had to go to Mass every Sunday. People would say to me, “Don’t they get upset about that, not wanting to go?” But that is part of the tradition. We were part of that tradition too; we remember all the days when we said, “I don’t want to go to Mass,” and the response was “Get in the car.”

Afterward, we would talk in the car about the sermon or the Gospel. Every year on Easter Sunday I’d start, and I could see the kids’ eyes rolling, and I’d say, “Now notice, what is the first word Jesus said?” And from the backseat I would hear, “Woman.” And I would go, “That is correct! He turns to Mary Magdalene and says, ‘Woman, why are you crying?’” And by the fifth year it was like, “No Mom, not this thing about Mary Magdalene again.”

They’re clearly in the stage of their lives where their attitude is, if an institution doesn’t work for you on a profound level, you don’t need the institution. That may play out for the rest of their lives, because there’s no question that they didn’t have the Catholic upbringing I had. They didn’t go to Catholic school; they weren’t steeped in the “shalt not”’s. I remember it controlling every aspect of my life.

I see them going through the process that we went through, when my husband, who’s also a lifelong Catholic, and I were in college.

Both of us had very little, if anything, to do with the Church. Then we got married in the Church, and as soon we had kids, boom! We were right back where we started from, because there was no question that we were going to raise them Catholic, if only to give that kind of grounding from which to question, reject, move away, and maybe move back again.

As a kid, I had the classic models of heaven and hell—one is up, the other's down; one is cool, the other is hot; one is blue, the other is red.

My mother died when I was nineteen and then I thought about it all the time, about this notion of whether there was afterlife and if there was what it meant—whether the death of good people left a different vapor trail than the death of not so good people.

My own profound sense is that the most beloved people we know don't die; they're as real in our minds as they were when they could walk through the door. I'm more questioning and agnostic about that than I was when I was much younger, which is unfortunate, because now more than ever I need it to be true. I think that is the crux of a faith.

My greatest moral education came not from Catholic school or the Ten Commandments, but from my mother. It had more to do with being kind and generous in your dealings with other people. It had a lot more to do with empathy and humanity and less to do with the doctrinal approach. My mother had very strong feelings about right and wrong based on the New Testament approach of loving thy neighbor as thyself.

Many people seem to find this weird disconnect between my Catholic background and my political liberalism. The New Testament was such a profoundly politically liberal document that it is inconceivable to me that conservatism has come out of it. It's driven explicitly and constantly by this need to do better by other people, by this moral obligation to do your best by and for others. That shaped my political sense in every way.

If you understand history, you understand the extent to which

Jesus hung around with unrelated women. It's so outside the realm of proper behavior; he had to have been trying to teach us something by that.

I don't do Catholic guilt. I don't feel guilty about being at odds with the Church over the things I'm at odds with them over.

As a child, I internalized the sense that I didn't need to feel that bad about anything, because I could make it better on a Saturday afternoon in a dark place. When we first started to go to confession, we really had nothing to confess; that is why we made everything up. And by the time we really had things to confess, either they were things that the Church had taught us were so shameful that we didn't want to confess them, or they seemed too amorphous to be confessable.

If I were pope for a year, I'd be the second woman pope. The first thing I would do is ordain women because that would lift the Church. In many ways we have seen society change for the better with women at high levels—in business, in the judiciary, and in politics. What we would see in the Church is a completely different approach to attitudes across the board; we would revive parishes throughout this country and the world. There are many women waiting in the wings. Then I would bring those women priests together for a special synod with their male counterparts.

Part of the problem with the Church is that it knows how to talk but doesn't know how to listen. I would probably spend six months with people just listening to one another. Then I would lift the ban on artificial birth control, especially in third-world countries, and say that people should keep themselves safe through condom use. In vitro fertilization—that's absolutely an absurd prohibition. I'd promote a humane approach to death; I was very sad when the Church involved itself in the Terri Schiavo case in inappropriate ways.

I'd also look for a more conciliatory, humane Christlike attitude toward Catholics who have divorced. The Church has caused so much pain and so much cynicism about the annulment process, which has become the Church exercising control over the divorce process and has nothing to do with what we used to think of as annulment. All of

my sister priests would be doing the same thing, so I'd be in really good company.

John Paul epitomized the dichotomy I was talking about, and the dovetailing of his papacy and the sex abuse scandals were very hard on my relationship with the Institutional Church. For a while, I went a little in and a little out in terms of going to Mass every Sunday. The parish in which we worship helped my perspective of the Institutional Church, because it's run by the Paulist fathers. It's a church that does everything that a good church should do, from engaging parishioners in the actual form of the Mass to providing all kinds of social services that are so important in its neighborhood. But I've been struggling with my relationship with the Institutional Church and whether I ratify what I consider the negative things it does in its name by attending Mass.

On the other hand, I feel proud of being a Catholic in fits and starts all the time. As a reporter, I was so proud of being Catholic so much of the time, because I had this sort of constant experience where someone would say, I know that you are really interested in teenage pregnancy and there is this great program for teen mothers. So I would go, and the person who was running the program would take me around and talk about what she was doing and how many young women were there and so on. I would be looking around for twenty minutes and then look at her and look at the pantsuit, look at the shoes, and ask her, "Are you a nun?" "Yes," she'd say, but she wouldn't want me to call her "Sister."

I get e-mails all the time when I touch on anything Catholic. People say, "I know your kind; you memorized the Baltimore Catechism, but you don't go to Mass, you're divorced, and you've had an abortion." And I think if these people could only see me every Sunday morning, if these people only knew that I was married in the Church, that all of my children have lived through the sacraments. People presume these things when you're politically liberal, and yet some of the most thoughtful and intelligent liberals I know are practicing Catholics.

On the other hand, there is a substantial group of intelligent and thoughtful people who are incredulous that you could have anything still to do with the Church as a person of thought and intellect. It is an acceptable bias to assume that at some level Catholicism is just dumb.