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A Catholic Reflects on Faith in Our Times



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Spirituality and/or Religion?

More than one reader has asked me to write about "spirituality" and "religion." I'm not ready to offer systematic reflections on what is a pretty vast topic, but I would like to share some early thoughts and invite comments and questions.

My first thought is that both terms come with baggage in tow. For me, "religion" generally means *organized* religion, and "spirituality" generally suggests spiritual *journey*. Right away we see the distinction: religion is something you belong to, while spirituality is something you live through. Religion is a visible entity outside you; spirituality is a personal reality within.

My second thought: this topic is the very hinge of a widening generation gap-- the largest since the 1960s. In short, the divide is between (mostly older) people who travel their spiritual journey *via* the path their religion guides them on, and those (mostly younger) people who prefer, for whatever reason, to find their own spiritual way unguided by any organization.

This oversimplifies, of course, since there are also people living without either conscious spirituality *or* religion, as well as people attached to religion *as an end in itself*, going through religion's motions but oblivious to any inner spirit.

The last group poses a special problem, since their way of life reveals how religion can become an obstacle, rather than in aid, to spiritual living. Their rote religious practice can alienate others from religion, who observe them and judge that religion has become a hollow, empty affair. In extreme cases, observers (especially young, impressionable observers) may see hypocrisy at work when someone's proclamations of faith do not match their practice, when they talk the talk (of organized religion) but do not walk the walk (of the spiritual journey), when they do not practice what they preach.

Need I say it? For 20th century American Catholics, the dominant dynamic between religion and spirituality -- perhaps the key factor in the generation gap I have noted -- is the perception of hypocrisy within our own Catholic clergy: first by those who preached love but practiced abuse, and second (but more grievously) by those Bishops who accepted their role as shepherd yet secretly loosed the wolves among their own flock.

The great fear is that this scandal has produced not only a single generation gap, but also a gap that will take *many* generations to heal. If large numbers of the Boomers' grown children choose not to raise their own children as Catholics, our families and our church could suffer the loss for the foreseeable future.

This reminds me that religion can be both good and bad, something Americans often have a blind spot about. It also reminds me that our spiritual journeys are also always personal but never private, since they are also affected by -- and also a fact -- other people. That's why it makes sense to argue that our spiritual lives need the structuring that religion can provide, since religion socializes spirituality into a communal experience. Yet recent scandals provide the obvious rebuttal: religion gone bad can be worse than no religion at all.

To clarify the link between spirituality and religion, I could start with the response a Jesuit priest I admire once gave me when I asked him if he could define "spirituality" in generic terms -- that is, not as a specific spirituality tradition like the Ignatian, Carmelite, or Franciscan traditions. He replied: "Any spirituality worth the name does three things: it makes you feel spoken to; it makes you feel heard; it makes you feel part of something bigger than yourself. "

If that Jesuit priest was right -- and I think he was -- that might imply that religion's value is to provide an organized context (traditions, rituals, beliefs, symbols, and values) for such feelings.

But then the next generation has a perfect right to ask: why should I choose *this* context (i.e., the Catholic Church) for my personal spiritual life? Why should I even think that it would help me if I did? Will belonging to it make me feel

more spoken to? More heard? More part of something bigger?

In other words, we're back to the challenge that fascinated 1960s youths and bedeviled their elders: the challenge of "*relevance*." That word became a battered buzzword a generation ago, but its challenge remains: "How is the vast troubled complexity of the Catholic *religion*—its history, ritual, and beliefs—relevant to my own *spiritual* life?" It's this question that determines whether one sees religion as a support for one's spiritual life, or not.

This is a question everyone answers for themselves, but no one answers it in a vacuum. In some eras, Catholicism's relevance is crystal clear; in others, it is totally fogged in. I'm afraid we've wandered into the fog.

I recently spoke on Catholic Social Doctrine at Saint Matthias Parish in Marlborough, Massachusetts. The setting was delightful: the lower hall outfitted with torchiere lights, flowers in vases atop roundtables with burgundy tablecloths, a selection of hors d'oeuvres as well as beer, wine, and soft drinks. People enjoyed the evening of socializing, conversation, presentation, and discussion, but the assembled crowd was mostly over 50. There was general agreement that few institutions can match the profound world vision embodied by Catholic social teaching since 1891—and this vision *does* give the Church a claim to relevance—but many expressed worry that such inspirational vision is lost on a younger generation that has already dismissed the Catholic Church as a less-than-credible moral authority.

As I listened to the worries, it occurred to me that my own generation had simply had the *good luck* to live through Vatican Council II (1962-1965), which unexpectedly answered the challenge of "relevance" by shifting the Church from the "go-through-the-motions" emptiness of pre-conciliar Catholicism to a Church that was opening its windows to the fresh air of an enlivening spirit. In America, this transformed the Catholic Church's public image almost overnight.

Suddenly, in the late 1960s, Catholicism was a champion of change! We've seen how the banner of change galvanized today's youth behind Barack Obama; well, the same thing happened to their parents 40 years ago—in part because of the Catholic Church!

For a while John-Paul II added to Catholicism's good PR, making the Church an unavoidable presence in world affairs. But for Americans that was largely undone by the scandals that surfaced after 2000, and parish closings and priest shortages have worsened the effect.

It pains me now to think that, 40 years ago, the answer to the challenge of "relevance" may have been this simple: the terrific PR boost Catholicism gained from Vatican II. It pains me because, as simple as that analysis seems, it poses two problems for my own children's generation. First, PR is a transitory benefit; public image, like opinion polls, inevitably goes up and down, and right now the Catholic Church's PR is lower now in the US than at any time in memory. Second, we see no Council -- or anything else -- arriving soon to turn that bad PR around (though my Marlborough audience applauded Benedict XVI's new social encyclical, they moaned over his PR gaffs).

It is even possible -- though the optimist in me resists this -- that we older Catholics must resign ourselves to a difficult truth: we *might* share the importance and complexity of our children's spiritual growth as they search for the true meaning in value of their own lives -- but they *might not* share our attachment to the religious organization that guided our own spiritual journeys.

They are a generation open-minded about *spirituality* but not about *religion*. Can we open their minds?

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