

CrossCurrents *A Catholic Reflects on Faith in Our Times*

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Losing Faith

Listening to Barack Obama's State of the Union address, I was especially struck by this passage:

Unfortunately, too many of our citizens have lost faith that our biggest institutions — our corporations, our media, and, yes, our government — still reflect these same values. Each of these institutions are full of honorable men and women doing important work that helps our country prosper. But each time a CEO rewards himself for failure, or a banker puts the rest of us at risk for his own selfish gain, people's doubts grow. Each time lobbyists game the system or politicians tear each other down instead of lifting this country up, we lose faith. The more that TV pundits reduce serious debates to silly arguments, big issues into sound bites, our citizens turn away. No wonder there's so much cynicism out there. No wonder there's so much disappointment.

I noticed two things. First, Obama mentioned government (including lobbyists and politicians), media, and corporations—but he never mentioned churches. It is, of course, bad politics to criticize churches, no matter how appalling their performance. Nonetheless his comments beg the question: are not churches also big institutions, and also sometimes guilty of abusing their powers?

Second, Obama twice spoke of losing faith. The irony is in using “faith” while overlooking the very institutions (churches) which claim to be stewards of faith. It's a double irony, in fact: the public figure most vocal about this loss of faith is our head of state, not the head of any church.

This double irony makes me wonder several things. First, is Obama right that cynicism is widespread? Second, is it really due to a loss of faith in our institutions? Third, is our Church also implicated in this? Fourth, what is to be done?

First: Is Cynicism Widespread? What typified the times during my youth was an unlikely mix of negative and positive attitudes. Everything was up for grabs, “Question Authority!” was our slogan, rules were made to be broken, and the times, they were a-changing away from the racist, warlike, materialist ways of the recent past. So we combined a fierce critique of the status quo with a fervent exuberance about the new Aquarian age to come. We were such

innocents; we actually believed we lived just before the dawn of that age.

That innocence seems long lost today (except for some lingering nostalgia for the 1960s) and its exuberance has evaporated. Today's critique is grimmer, less rosy-eyed, more bitter and more self-absorbed. Cynicism? Yes, I think so—though the hunger to believe in something better was precisely what impelled so many first time voters to fuel Obama's massive 2008 victory margin.

Second: Are Institutions to Blame? That “Question Authority!” slogan meant literally what it said. People living amid the conformist docility of the 1950s post-war culture tended to accept the authority of government, police, church, and corporations over their lives simply because peace and prosperity were such a profound relief in the wake of Depression and two World Wars. But when outgoing President Eisenhower warned us about the military industrial complex's power, he signaled the first crack in our culture's complacency. Growing unease from the civil rights movement and the Cuban missile crisis erupted with the shock of JFK's assassination, and broke into open resistance as troops left for Vietnam. My personal sense is that Americans have never recovered their 1950s-style confidence after those traumas. That old confidence in authority and institutions has been eroding for nearly 50 years.

The shifting attitude to institutions was, after all, rooted in fact. Banks failed in the Depression – and risked failing again in 2008. The “normalcy” of private home ownership in post-war America collapsed with the mortgage crisis. The stock market's plunge robbed many of their savings. Vietnam and Iraq resulted from the failure of U.S. intelligence and U.S. defense strategies. The Healthcare crisis came from government's 45-year failure to follow up Medicare with help for the rest of the population. Real middle class incomes fell steadily after 1970 because unions grew weak and US corporations failed to maintain their global edge. GM's bankruptcy was merely the flagship of such failure.

In a word: people have lost faith in institutions because those institutions have failed them.

Third: Is Our Church Implicated? Does anyone doubt that our churches have also failed to maintain their members' trust?

Sometimes this failure has been the *subjective perception* of certain Catholics. As early as 1965, some (especially conservative) Catholics became alarmed because "the changes" proclaimed by Vatican II meant they could no longer count on the Church as their "rock," their still point amid an increasingly turbulent era.

Other, more liberal Catholics had their hopes crushed in 1968, when "Humanae Vitae" revealed that church renewal would not include the updating of official church teachings on sex.

A substantial number of priests failed to cope with the rigors of priestly ministry and/or celibate life, and left.

Subsequent years saw more Catholics slipping from the institution's embrace over similar personal issues: abortion, divorce, homosexuality, women's ordination, religious education, even closed confessionals and Communion in the hand.

But the institution also added *objective failures* that gave people a factual basis for losing confidence.

The transitions triggered by Vatican II were often under-prepared, badly explained, and unevenly implemented. The official mandate for adult formation was largely shelved. The failure to replace old-style "obligatory Catholicism" with a fresh motivational system left church authorities helpless to gain compliance from rank and file Catholics – and without compliance, no authority can lead people who choose not to follow. This led to declining Mass attendance, the neglect of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the rise of "drop off" parents who enrolled their children but skipped Mass themselves, a decline in giving rates, and growing confusion over Catholic identity marked by complaints about "cafeteria Catholicism."

The failure to address priestly celibacy, and the accompanying denial about the need to re-frame vocations,

gradually spread the priest shortage across America until even densely populated dioceses began closing parishes.

And finally, the last straw: the revelation of a double malfeasance dating back a century or more, implicating the institution in the worst imaginable abuses of power: the widespread raping of children by priests, who were *themselves* enabled by the consistent support of their bishops, whose ludicrous attempts to avoid scandal by sweeping it under their robes merely multiplied the number of suffering, traumatized victims.

So we find ourselves, at the end of a new century's first decade, hard-pressed to name a single major institution that has not failed us. It is not we who have abandoned faith; it is those institutions that have stolen it from us.

Fourth: What Can Be Done? The answer is, I fear, all too simple and altogether too challenging. In failing us, these institutions have betrayed our confidence in them. Restoring our confidence requires rebuilding our trust – and trust always comes from a track record.

In short, they must begin delivering on their promises, even if we're not yet prepared to believe in them. They must *show* us that any future trust of them will not be displaced. They must win us over, all over again – and this time the burden of proof is on them.

The challenge is profound, since major institutions are not in the habit of proving themselves worthy – they expect people to take their reliability for granted. So their first step to recovering our confidence must be to acknowledge that they have lost it.

Perhaps there is no better place to start than for institutional leaders to commit Obama's remark to memory. Of course, given the president's politic omission of churches, our bishops will have to be perceptive enough to read between the lines and add themselves to his list of those who have lost our faith in them.

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