

Sampling 'Catholicisms' in the Lone Star State

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 14, 2008 All Things Catholic

Reporters who have served on assignment in another part of the world have a rule of thumb that after six months you want to write a book about the place, but after six years you're afraid even to write a sentence. By that point, you know all too well the dangers of generalization.

I'm in Texas this week researching a piece for a future edition of *NCR* about Catholicism in the Lone Star State, picking up on the fact that Texas now has a cardinal for the first time, and it hasn't taken me six years to grasp that generalizations here are usually exercises in futility. Sociologically, I've discovered, there really is no such thing as "Catholicism" in Texas -- instead, there are multiple "Catholicisms." Experiences vary enormously depending upon one's region, ethnicity, socio-economic background, political and theological outlook, and so on. For example, what it means to be Catholic in the diocese of Tyler in northeastern Texas, where Catholics represent a tiny 4.4 percent of the population surrounded by a vast Baptist majority, is worlds apart from Brownsville, where Catholics are a whopping 85 percent and overwhelmingly Latino. It's also very different for a first-generation Vietnamese immigrant in a tightly-knit ethnic parish such as Our Lady of Lavang in Houston, versus an Anglo Catholic in a place like Johnson City, LBJ's hometown in rural central Texas.

In my upcoming piece I hope to sketch several "faces" of the church in Texas, but here I'll hone in on just one piece of this larger picture.

Among other defining characteristics, Texas is an intensely religious place, with rates of weekly church attendance, religious affiliation, and volunteerism in faith-based groups well above national averages. Parts of Texas form what is colloquially known as the "the Bible belt"; according to the 2008 Texas Almanac, Texas leads the country in the total number of Protestant Evangelicals, with more than 5 million. Even though Catholicism got here first and remains the largest denomination in the state at 6.4 million, Evangelicals (especially Baptists) exercise a vast cultural influence. That makes Texas a laboratory for Catholic/Evangelical exchange, since it contains the country's largest population of both Catholics and Evangelicals living cheek-by-jowl.

One hypothesis I brought to my Texas swing, therefore, was that there's likely to be some "Evangelical transfer," meaning ways in which the Evangelical ethos influences Catholic life. (Naturally the inverse is also true, that Catholicism can influence the Evangelical experience, but that's a conversation for another time.) Transfer can take the form of imitation, either conscious or unconscious, or it might produce equal-and-opposite efforts to emphasize distinctively Catholic beliefs and practices. More broadly, Evangelical transfer can refer to ways in which Catholicism reflects the same spirit of local initiative and missionary zeal one finds in the Evangelical world.

So far my experience has largely confirmed this hypothesis, though with the caveat that it's certainly not true everywhere or for everyone.

"Evangelical transfer" can be glimpsed in ways large and small. For example, Fr. David Konderla, director of the sprawling St. Mary's Catholic Center at Texas A&M University, says it sometimes shapes the way Texas Catholics pray.

"At our student group meetings, ask a Catholic kid to pray and rather than reciting the 'Hail Mary' they're probably going to say something like: 'Father, we really just thank you Lord, we just want to give praise to you,'" Konderla said. "It sounds very much like what they hear from their Protestant friends in the dorms and sororities."

It's an insight that Deacon John De La Garza, campus minister at the University of Texas, echoes.

"That word 'just' will get you right in there ? 'I just want to thank you, Lord,' and so on," De La Garza said. "It's coming right off that Evangelical television screen."

Encounter with Evangelicals can push some Catholics to delve more deeply into their own faith.

"Our students are confronted almost daily by their Baptist brothers and sisters about what they believe, and especially whether they've been saved. It draws them deeper into their faith, especially the Bible," said Michelle Goodwin, associate director of the University Catholic Center at the University of Texas. "It's the Protestant influence that helps shape their Catholicism, and that shapes their catechesis."

Mark Leatherman, a 20-year-old undergraduate at UT, offers an example.

"Coming from East Texas, I grew up in the Bible Belt," Leatherman said on Monday. "In public school, 90 percent of my friends were Protestants ? believing Protestants. They're very devout. I got used to defending my faith, which made it lots stronger."

Leatherman said he developed a strong devotion to the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and to Mary, precisely because those were points upon which he sometimes felt pressed by his Evangelical friends.

Transfer can work the other way too, prompting Evangelicals to take a deeper look at their own faith, and every now and then even eliciting sympathetic curiosity about Catholicism. One example is 21-year old Cheryl Castillo, a humanities major at the University of St. Thomas in Houston who grew up Southern Baptist and who was received into the Catholic church last Easter.

Castillo said what attracted her about Catholicism was its consistent ethic of life.

"Growing up, I knew a lot of Christians who were against abortion, but they didn't seem to have any problem with the death penalty, for example," Castillo said. "I got interested in why the Catholic church seemed to have this consistent teaching across the board. I started talking to Catholic friends about it, who gave me things to read, and that eventually led me into the church."

For institutional examples of Evangelical transfer, consider the following three cases:

- Houston is home to the Catholic Charismatic Center, founded in 1972 by Maryknoll Fr. Richard E. Paulissen, and run today by the Companions of the Cross, a new religious order launched in Canada which emphasizes a charismatic spirituality. It's one of the largest charismatic centers in the country, with a central sanctuary that seats 2,500 people, resembling in some ways the look and feel of a "mega-church." That's not entirely an accident, given that America's largest mega-church, Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church, is just about 10 minutes away on the I-59. (Lakewood is now ensconced in what was the Compaq Center, former home of the Houston Rockets.) I met several Catholic converts and "reverts" at the Charismatic Center who told me they had been drawn to Lakewood, but who found that they can get the same high-octane, spirit-filled style of praise and worship at the Charismatic Center, along with the depth of Catholic faith and sacramental life. Joseph Smith drives 32 miles each way to come to the Charismatic Center three times a week, and he told me: "The Catholic church might deny it until it's blue in the face, but we pushed the Holy Spirit out through the back door. But now it's back in the church." Smith made this point, by the way, as we worked our way through two slabs of some 300 lbs. of pork barbequed for a Saturday afternoon get-together for leaders of the center's Anglo and Hispanic ministries.
- St. Mary's Catholic Center at Texas A&M University is among the biggest and most dynamic campus ministry programs in the country. It's a vocations powerhouse, having produced 112 priests and religious so far, with 39 more Aggie alums currently in formation. Each year the center averages 8-10 vocations to the priesthood and religious life; last year's total was 16. By itself, St. Mary's therefore generates more vocations than many dioceses. The center's six weekend Masses regularly draw around 4,000 students. (Roughly 25 percent of A&M's student population of 45,000 is Catholic.) Konderla says that the unique ethos of A&M -- drawing students from rural, intensely religious parts of Texas -- is part of this picture. Paul Holub, a 22-year-old health education major who's considering a vocation to the priesthood, told me that it's not uncommon for Catholic and Evangelical undergrads to get "sidetracked" during study sessions talking about their faith -- pivoting especially, he said, on what it means to be "saved."
- Four of the six Anglican Use parishes in the United States, operating under a "Pastoral Provision" set up in 1980 to accommodate breakaway Episcopalians who wished to join the Catholic church while retaining elements of their Anglican heritage, are located in Texas. This is clearly not "Evangelical transfer" in the sense of imitating Evangelical liturgical or spiritual styles; Anglican Use worship is high-church and emphatically Catholic, celebrating the Mass, for example, in the *ad orientem* style. Yet observers say the "can-do," frontier spirit of Texas religiosity probably helps explain why this experiment has taken root here and basically nowhere else. The first Anglican Use parish, Our Lady of Atonement in San Antonio, was formed in 1983 when a group of 18 laity decided they wanted to form a parish under the "Pastoral Provision." They conducted a national search for a pastor, locating Fr. Christopher Phillips, then in the process of leaving the Episcopal priesthood in Rhode Island, and persuaded him to drive down to Texas with his wife and (then) three kids in a VW. (Phillips had to wait a year and a half for Rome to approve his petition to become a Catholic priest.) The arrangement was blessed by then-Archbishop Patrick Flores of San Antonio. Clinton Brand, a parishioner at the Anglican Use parish in Houston, Our Lady of Walsingham, said the move was typically Texan: "These people decided that the pope said we can do this, so by God we're going to do it." The spread of Anglican Use parishes in Texas may also be related to the

fact that some of the fiercest Episcopal resistance to perceived liberalizing currents has erupted here; when then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote a letter encouraging traditionalist Anglicans in 2003, for example, they were meeting in Plano, a wealthy northern suburb of Dallas.

To be clear, one shouldn't put too much weight on "Evangelical transfer," as if every Texas Catholic were somehow touched by it. Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, for example, told me on Wednesday that in his experience, Anglo Catholics tend to be more influenced by the Evangelical ethos than Hispanics; Maria Frederick of the Texas Catholic Conference, who graduated from the University of Texas at Austin, said that especially among younger Catholics, it's the most committed whose antennae pick up Evangelical signals. For the majority of younger people less inclined to think religious thoughts, she said, the more profound cultural influence is basic secular indifference.

It's also worth saying that for those whom it does reach, "Evangelical transfer" can be a mixed blessing. Goodwin said that sometimes campus ministers have to offer basic catechesis to ensure that students are clear about differences between the two traditions. DiNardo added that Texas Catholics can be so focused on their local congregation that it's sometimes tough to get them to think about the diocese or the universal church; laughingly, he says this breed of Texas Catholics sometimes strike him as "congregationalists with sacraments."

Yet the examples of Evangelical transfer listed above nonetheless illustrate a basic law of religious life: generally speaking, a rising tide lifts all boats. The cross-pollination and activist spirit generated by vibrant grass-roots pluralism is typically a boon to religious faith and practice of all sorts, including Catholicism.

One sees this clearly today in Latin America, where for 500 years Catholicism was essentially a state-imposed monopoly, and in some ways went to sleep -- with low rates of Mass attendance, severe priest shortages, and low levels of evangelization and catechesis. Over the last-half century, an explosion in Pentecostal and Evangelical movements has eroded the Catholic monopoly in Latin America, but it has also galvanized Catholicism. Vocations to the priesthood offer one measure of this reawakening: in Honduras, the national seminary had an enrollment of 170 in 2007, an all-time high for a country where the total number of priests is slightly more than 400. Twenty years ago, Honduras had fewer than 40 candidates. Bolivia saw the most remarkable increase; in 1972, the entire country had 49 seminarians, while in 2001 the number was 714, representing growth of 1,357 percent. Overall, seminarians in Latin America went up 440 percent during the last quarter-century, according to statistics collected by the "[Religion in Latin America](#) [1]" Web site created by Dominican Fr. Edward Cleary of Providence College.

The moral of the story is that competition (within the limits of civility and mutual respect) is as healthy in religion as it is in any other area of life.

Texas thus offers a classic American illustration of a basic principle of religious sociology -- where there is religious ferment of any sort, there is likely to be Catholic dynamism too. Far from being threatened by pluralism, for the most part Catholicism ought to welcome it. To invoke a classic Aggie formula, a vibrant religious marketplace is basically "Good Bull."

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