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American Catholics, diverse and holy

by Gerry Fialkowski



Vicki Nguyen pours water into the baptismal font during the blessing ceremony at the Cathedral of Christ the Light in Oakland, Calif., last year.

Since I was an undergraduate I've believed that the church would fare better if the hierarchy had keener listening skills. As a psychotherapist, one of my most valuable tools has been the ability to attend to persons in pain. Counselors know healing and growth may be promoted when someone attends to another, passes no judgment, validates the person's input, and manifests genuine compassion for the other's needs and concerns.

I am not saying that church leaders need to be like therapists, but then maybe that is a workable paradigm. If we more frequently experienced being heard by the powers that be, then many more of us might come to believe we are the people of God. Most active Catholics, in spite of little affirmation from church leaders, know that they are indeed God's people.

In his book *Sense of the Faithful*, Jerome Baggett reveals the variety of ways in which the people of God both grasp and grapple with their Catholicism.

Baggett is an associate professor of religion and society at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley and visiting professor of sociology at the University of California. His book reflects his curiosity about today's Catholic laity and his obvious respect for American Catholics who describe themselves as "active Catholics."

The ways Catholics choose to live out their faith demonstrate appropriate responses to the culture's everchanging influence and demands. He found American Catholics have good insights and know how to follow their faith and live out their religious beliefs.



He interviewed 300 Catholics in six parishes of the Oakland, Calif., diocese -- congregations that differed in how they celebrated liturgies in terms of participation, music and language. Parishes represented the upper economic middle classes and others not so financially comfortable, congregations of varied educational backgrounds, ethnic groups and professional standards, some open to all sexual orientations, others not. Baggett did not avoid the tough issues.

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As he sought their opinions, he asked people if they agreed with church teaching on topics that ranged from the war in Iraq to the death penalty, abortion to birth control, and their reactions to the clergy sex-abuse scandal.

The parishioners projected confidence in what they perceived as being essential beliefs for "good" Catholics. It was not a surprise to read that most people said that in order to be a good Catholic one needed to affirm the church's doctrinal teachings of the real presence of Jesus' body and blood in the Eucharist and the resurrection of Jesus. These core beliefs gather us together on Sundays and sustain our communal feelings of spiritual belonging. On the other hand, more than half responded that good Catholics need not agree with the church's teaching on items such as papal infallibility, birth control and homosexual relations.

This makes me wonder what would happen if bishops and other church leaders sat in on such candid adult discussion groups. Would they hear the energy around topics such as infallibility and same sex-relations? Would they understand how openness to different ways of being and viewing love, covenant and commandment gets played out in the day-to-day existence of ordinary folk?

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How would church leadership hear the struggle and the wisdom of the clients in my office who love God and feel alienated from the church of their youth? Does the Vatican know of the frequent disconnect between what is proclaimed and how people in the pews receive and hear the pronouncements? Do the American bishops and the Vatican understand that we have only begun to grieve and acknowledge the repercussions of the clergy abuse scandal?

I have heard the pain and seen the tears. We think about the issue of women's ordination. Think about it? We have been told there is nothing to discuss, but women do discuss it in our prayer and study groups. We talk about the possibility of optional celibacy too. We wonder that mature adults cannot choose to serve God and also marry.

The groups with whom I pray and study find great affinity with Baggett's participants regarding same-sex orientation and relationships, optional celibacy and women's ordination. We worry when questioners are censored and new perspectives discouraged. Does the Vatican believe and honor the sense of the faithful? Do the bishops? Sometimes some do.

In Baggett's book the reader hears some of the sacred stories that the people of God shared with the author, the beliefs that have driven their behaviors. Church leaders, bishops and pastors alike might benefit from this book's revelations as to how diverse American Catholics are. And how holy.

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