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Why I still call myself a Catholic

Jamie Manson | May. 7, 2009

It?s the question I get more than any other: Do you still consider yourself a Catholic?

It?s the critique I most frequently receive on this blog site: Just leave the church if you?re so unhappy.

Spending seven years at a Protestant divinity school, first as a student and later as an employee, enriched and expanded my understanding of what it means to be Catholic. Before arriving at graduate school, I grew up on Long Island in an Italian Catholic family that rarely went to church. Though I went to religious instruction, received the sacraments with the rest of the girls and boys, and attended church on the big feast days, the influence of the institutional church (involvement in parish life, connections with priests and nuns) was distant at best.

Yet, even without going to church much, my religious worldview was thoroughly Catholic. I grew up surrounded by my grandmother?s novenas and rosaries, my grandfather?s stories about Jesus, and many powerful images of the nativity, the Last Supper, Mary, St. Michael the Archangel, and, of course, the Infant of Prague. Hard as this may be to believe, I did not meet a Protestant until I was in my early twenties. Now and then we drove by the exterior one of those mysterious, non-Catholic church buildings. No one I knew went there. We wondered what went on inside of *that* building.

The Protestants that I eventually met were students and teachers at a divinity school, so they were pretty serious. There were 40 different varieties of them: Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, UCC, and then more foreign types, like Reformed church, Assemblies of God, church of the Nazarene, even Mennonites. Less than a month into taking classes, worshipping, and eating meals with these folks, I realized that something was different. It wasn?t the obvious things, like that they didn?t have a pope or a daily Eucharist, but something much deeper, more nuanced that differentiated us.

After talking with a few Catholic professors, I realized that a key difference was in our vision, more specifically the way in which we understood human nature and the power of grace. The distinction could be traced all the way back to the Reformation. The key theological concept that distinguished the Catholic view from the Calvinist view was in the conception of the relationship between grace and nature. For the Calvinist, humanity is sinful and fallen, and God saves human beings in spite of themselves. For the Catholic, grace perfects nature. God redeems us only from our sinfulness, not from who we are, because we are intrinsically God?s beloved children. For Catholics, there is a dynamic relationship with God, and human beings cooperate in their own transformation. Paradoxically, Catholic guilt is not nearly as heavy as Protestant guilt!

This essential distinction grounds so much of the Catholic theological tradition. The notion that grace perfects nature forms the basis for the uniquely Catholic idea that all finite things in creation are capable of revealing truths about what is infinite or eternal. Catholics have a sacramental view of the world. That is, for a Catholic, all of creation is good, and everything in our finite world can be a vessel of God?s presence and God?s transforming grace. This idea provides the foundation for Catholicism?s rich mysticism and spirituality, its unparalleled social justice doctrine, its care of the poor, and its exquisite legacy of artists and writers.

These traditions keep me calling myself Catholic. But I separate the Catholic tradition from the institutional church, namely its governing body. Because I see so much harm done to women, to those dying from the AIDS pandemic, to American nuns under scrutiny, to victims of pedophilia, to divorced people, to women who have had abortions, and to gays and lesbians. I do not currently trust that the hierarchy of the church is acting with integrity toward the people of God. I struggle to believe that the hierarchy?s intentions are centered in the desire to be a beacon of the healing, reconciling, challenging love of God. Rather, I wonder if they aren?t motivated instead by the drive toward self-preservation rooted in the fear of engaging the people of God where they are in all of their very real struggles and questions.

For me, there is nothing to ?leave.? I cannot leave my Catholic tradition any more than I can leave my Italian tradition, which also formed my vision and imagination, my way of seeing the world, my way of relating to others. One can argue that I have left the Catholic church since I no longer accept the authority of the hierarchy. However, I feel equally left behind by the institution. As a woman and lesbian, I have no voice in this institution, and I am denied the ability to make a substantive contribution to it. Rather than speaking about leaving the church, I believe is time to call the institutional church to accountability for how many people it has left behind.

Unlike many of those fighting for reform in the Catholic church, I?m not aiming to ?take back my church.? I?m not sure that the institution and its endless tomes of rules, its privileged priesthood, and its propensity for uninviting people from the Eucharistic table is something worth re-inheriting because I?m not convinced these functions were ever conceived or practiced with God-centered intentions.

I don?t wish to reclaim this church, nor do I feel like I have to in order to call myself Catholic. Rather, I am attempting to take all of the riches of the Catholic tradition with me and share them with others in the hope of finding communities that share this common Catholic vision: that we are all unequivocally called to have a preferential option for the poor, that contemplative prayer and meditation is a path to greater wholeness, and that ritual, symbol, image and word can make real the life-giving power of God?s love in our world.

Jamie Manson received her master of divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology, personal commitments and sexual ethics with Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley. She is the former editor in chief of the Yale magazine Reflections, and currently serves as director of Social Justice Ministries at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, working primarily with New York City?s homeless and poor populations. She is a member of the national board of the Women?s Ordination Conference.

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