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Practiced Catholics

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

If you want to make a Monsignor smile or a bishop nod sagely, check the box that marks "practicing Catholic" on any questionnaire or form handed to you. "Practicing Catholic" is a phrase as smoothly worn as St. Peter's sculpted foot in St. Peter's Basilica by appreciative hierarchs and pastors who know what they are looking for in Church members.

"Practicing Catholics" are not your "Once a Year at Christmas or Easter" parishioners; they are rather the steady army awaiting orders as they patiently carry the colors of Catholicism across the modern world.

Your "practicing Catholic" is your Bill Donahue kind of guy, a saloon fighter ready to throw a chair or a punch at anybody who seems to speak ill of the Catholic Church.

"Practicing Catholics" are loyal followers who warm hierarchical hearts by tossing their envelopes in the plate as if they were dropping logs into a hungry fire. People who long for the return of the pre-Vatican II Church are actually pleading for pastors like the one who, in infallible tones explained to me long before Vatican II convened, "Your 'practicing Catholic' is your 'contributing Catholic.'"

Pastors, bishops, and others burdened with administrative responsibilities should pay attention now to another kind of believer, one, in fact, whom some of them neglect, abuse, or demean on a regular basis. This is the "Practiced Catholic," the one who is thoroughly, indeed, reflexively Catholic from long committed experience in the Church. Such believers are not rebels or revolutionaries but they are theologically sophisticated and they can instinctively tell when Father up there in the pulpit is feeding them from a spirit filled heart or from a microwave memory that heats up leftovers that leaves them hungry.

Practiced Catholics, for example, know how to read and do not need the pastor to review the parish

bulletin for them before he begins Mass. Such pastors love to talk and often give, but hardly out of devotion to the Trinity, three sermons, one a warm-up on the bulletin, followed by a ponderous sermon after the Gospel, all this topped off with another set of reflections before he lets anybody out of the Church.

The beginning and end of Mass are the alpha and omega of the faith for these self-indulgent preachers. They warn people about the hazards and near sinfulness of what, in their judgment, constitutes "coming late" or "leaving early." I have heard pastors tell people that they have missed Mass if they arrive after the priest has begun the Mass and that they have also missed if they leave before the priest has left the sanctuary and departed.

"Practiced Catholics," however, know the three parts of the Mass are the Offertory, the Consecration, and the Communion, and they ignore priests threatening them with damnation. They are also practiced at ignoring letters from the bishops that are read at Mass. Their intuitive Catholicism guides them as they sift the wheat of pastoral communications. They learned in grammar school that the principal parts of the Mass are the offertory, the consecration, and the communion and, as adults, they understand that when the priest proclaims, "Go, the Mass is finished," it is in the imperative voice and that they can take him literally and head for the parking lots.

Practiced Catholics have been around since the beginning of Christianity. The early theologians referred to them when they urged Catholics to follow the "sensus fidelium," or the feelings, as we might say, of the faithful believers. These are the Catholics who provide a reliable sense of what the Church teaches in the way they pray and the way they live.

Practiced Catholics offer a rule of thumb for belief according to the venerable insight that, if you want to know what the Church teaches or what is right, ask what the "sanior et major pars fidelium" believes or does. That means it is always safe to follow the path of the "larger and healthier portion of believers." Had the Church handed the problem of sex abuse over to a group of practiced Catholics, it would have been resolved many years ago.

The Church prides itself in its "munera" or "gifts." One of these is given only to practiced Catholics, the Gift of Reception. By this special guidance of the Spirit no teaching can be considered Catholic unless it is received by that same healthy majority of the faithful.

Yet it is practiced Catholics who are often criticized, ignored, told how to vote, or refused permission to have their speakers on Church property. These are the Catholics to whom the hierarchy should pay more attention. There is an old saying that we should "feel with the Church." The only way you can find that out is by asking these abused and neglected but triumphantly faithful Catholics what they feel about the Church and what is going on in it these days.

[Eugene Cullen Kennedy is emeritus professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.]

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