

Sermon on the mount: the first gathering of cafeteria Catholics

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | May. 6, 2010 | Bulletins from the Human Side

You can tell them, as the Gospel puts it, a long way off. They are so puffed up with the hot air of self righteousness they resemble a covey of balloons jouncing against each other as they wait for take-off.

These are not just Catholics who want to preserve the Catholic values they cherish; they are rather those who, as careless of the truth as political consultants, sling mud at followers of Vatican II. If they took any more pleasure in denouncing the latter as "cafeteria Catholics" they would almost certainly commit a mortal sin.

To them, "cafeteria Catholics" pick and choose what teachings they will consume instead of stuffing down everything on the house menu, including yesterday's now rancid specials. These critics favor teachings that do not affirm humans or the universe but those that slap a moral lien on both. For them religion is castor oil for the spirit; it only does you good when it makes you feel bad.

What exactly is a cafeteria and does it remind us of anything? According to the American Heritage Dictionary *cafeteria* derives from the idea of a "coffee house," in which people gather convivially to take food and drink together, an old notion that speaks to moderns, ask Starbucks, they can tell you.

A cafeteria "is a restaurant in which the customers are seated at a counter and carry their meals to tables." Does this bring to mind a bacchanal? Or does it stir associations with the everyday sacramental experience of the Catholic community?

Catholics choose an atmosphere for the Eucharist that celebrates rather than denigrates them. They do not bring some one-size-fits all appetite for watered down New Age broth or for the stale bread and worse, menus written in the no longer intelligible language of another age. Instead, they express the specific spiritual hungers that arise from their individual experiences of loss and of their personal longings to be filled.

They come to a table-like altar to eat and drink the body and blood of the Lord, laying their own lives with their failures and their dreams on its surface and returning to their pews knowing that they have not been accepted and fortified not in general but in the unique circumstances of their own lives. Yes, like those in a cafeteria, they know they are hungry and they pick out the nourishment that is right for them.

And like Jesus, when he looked out on the people spread across the hillside and recognized that some were blessed because they were meek and others because they sought peace while beyond them were those blessed because they did not complain but embraced their mourning while others earned a blessing because they thirsted for justice. The sacramental parallel is completed as these believers discover the nourishment they had chosen for themselves and give it away to feed the strangers around them.

Perhaps the Sermon on the Mount was the first gathering of cafeteria Catholics, people who honestly admitted their own spiritual hungers and sought and then shared just the food that they needed. They knew then what Catholics know now, that Jesus and his church will feed them just as they are in their own lives. Jesus looked on them as he gazes on us, moved by their plight and ours, that is, by their hunger for special food for their own

needs. He proclaimed to them what he does to those now damned as "cafeteria Catholics," that the Kingdom of God belongs to them.

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