

## Catholics need to rethink their strategy

Isabella R. Moyer | Jun. 6, 2012 NCR Today

Gone are the days of unquestioning obedience and obeisance to hierarchical authority by all Catholics. Many have embraced their own God-given gift of reason and freedom of conscience. This is not the same as accepting or rejecting a belief based on convenience or a whim.

Those who seek a truly adult faith know it requires the hard work of both head and heart. Active belief, faith lived in the world, requires honest and open dialogue with the world, with the church and with those around you. And it requires prayerful pondering, a dialogue with you and God. A church that respects this adult quest would support and honor the need for personal, interpersonal and communal dialogue.

Sadly, our church is being perceived more and more as a doctrinal police state rather than a community of adult believers seeking deeper faith and understanding together. Each new pronouncement and denouncement sets up yet another battlefield. Beliefs are defended by aggressively attacking the beliefs of another. The lines are drawn and trenches are dug ever deeper. Digging into a hole for protection and lobbying grenades to the other side doesn't win a war. All it does is move the line forward or backward a few inches. We need a different strategy.

First of all, let's admit that we are all "cafeteria Catholics" to some degree. The groaning buffet table that is our universal church is too much for any of us to take in at once or to fully understand and accept with the same level of commitment and passion. We must stop judging each other by what we can fully accept with an open heart and what we continue to struggle to understand or believe.

A dear friend and mentor, now a retired bishop, spoke fondly of his years as a university chaplain. Students often admitted struggling with specific teachings in the church. Our friend would explain the reasoning behind the teaching. If the young person still could not accept it, he encouraged them to "put it on the back-burner" and revisit it in the future. There was no judgment, just a pastoral sensitivity to each person's faith journey. The "back-burner" mentality kept the door open rather than forcefully shutting it behind them.

Secondly, let's admit that merely repeating the same worn arguments will not convince anyone if those arguments seem irrational. I attended a 2008 Vatican-sponsored women's congress in Rome focused on the 20th anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the apostolic letter of John Paul II on the dignity of women. Speaker after speaker praised the pope's "theology of the body," the "feminine genius" and the call for a "new feminism." Still, there was a simmering undercurrent of questioning in the room. One woman courageously stood up and addressed the issue of the male-only priesthood. Protests came loudly and swiftly from the party faithful, who retorted with "we did not come all the way to Rome to hear someone speak out against the cChurch." Case closed. Or so they thought.

A Canadian bishop, an elderly man within months of retirement, quietly took the floor. He shared his own frustration as a bishop in dealing with this issue, especially with young people in his diocese. He could not convince them of the church's teaching that women could not be ordained. He respectfully proposed, "If our reasoning is not accepted, perhaps we need to rethink our reasoning."

We need to rethink our reasoning. This is what theologians, scholars and writers like Sr. Margaret Farley, Sr. Elizabeth Johnson and Sr. Joan Chittister are trying to do. They, and many others like them, are the courageous souls who dare to think outside of the box, seeking new ways to examine and explain our beliefs. And they are bravely addressing the issues that challenge many a Catholic soul. They are not telling anyone to leave the church if they do not accept all her teachings. In fact, by nudging us to deeper reflection and dialogue, they are helping many of us to stay in the midst of our own questioning, disillusionment and anger.

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