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ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

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*Father, You revealed Your Son to the nations
by the guidance of a star. Lead us to
Your Glory in Heaven by the Light of Faith.*

Thank You One and All

On behalf of our parish community I wish to recognize and thank the many people who helped to make Christmas 2013 the visible beauty that it was in the decorations of the church and the many ministries and parishioners who were involved in the liturgies. Thank you to all who worked so hard and tirelessly for the worthy celebration on the anniversary of Our Lord's Birth.



Vanishing Catholics

The following article was written by Fr. William P. Clark, OMI and appeared in the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* for December 23, 2013. Fr. Clark is a semi-retired American priest who has a long list of academic credentials and positions he has held at prominent Catholic institutions in the U.S. What he speaks of in this well-written article in one sense shouldn't be considered as

unexpected – Catholics leaving the Church for many different reasons. Priests of the Archdiocese of Toronto have long known that the fastest growing Christian group in North America is fallen-away or ex-Catholics. While some will react to this exodus as proof that there is something wrong with the Church and what she is doing, others will argue that it is the secular culture that is drawing people away from the Catholic Church and her teachings – the teachings of Christ. My pastoral opinion is that it is a lot of both.

According to recent demographic surveys, it seems there are presently 30 million people in the U.S. who identify themselves as "former Catholics." That figure is both surprising, and, for Catholics, disheartening.

Over the past 50 years or so, a profound change, other than that effected by Vatican II, has taken place in the Catholic Church. It might be described as the phenomenon of "vanishing Catholics." The Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, has identified four major challenges facing the Church today. First on his list is the exodus of young adults from the Church. According to recent demographic surveys, it seems there are presently 30 million people in the U.S. who identify themselves as "former Catholics." That figure is both surprising, and, for Catholics, disheartening. It represents a little less than 10 percent of the total population of this country. It also means that had those persons remained Catholic, approximately one in three Americans would be identified as Catholic. Only two religious groups represent a larger percentage of the U.S. population: Protestants (cumulatively) and current Catholics.

This phenomenon is disheartening not only for bishops and priests, but also for faithful Catholics generally. Many older Catholics are saddened at the sight of their children and grandchildren abandoning the Church.

Questions naturally arise. What has caused such a massive defection? How might one account for this phenomenon? It hardly seems possible that any single factor could explain a phenomenon of such magnitude. Various reasons for people

leaving the Church are well-known. Many of them have been operative from the earliest times of Christianity. In his first letter to Timothy, St. Paul reminds him that "The Spirit has explicitly said that during the last times some will desert the faith and pay attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines ..." (1 Tm 4:1-7). In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of dissensions and divisions among the faithful (1 Cor 1:10-16).

From the first centuries up to modern times, there have been doctrinal differences (heresies) which led to great numbers separating themselves from the Roman Catholic Church. Many others have left the Church for what can be described as practical reasons, rather than doctrinal differences.

Among the latter, there are many who separated themselves from the Church because of marriage problems. There are those who left because they became greatly dissatisfied with inadequate preaching, uninviting liturgy, and minimal hospitality in their parishes. It seems worth noting that expecting church attendance and public worship to be therapeutically satisfying often leads to disappointment and eventual alienation.

Not a few have left the Church because of real or perceived mistreatment by bishops or pastors. Reactions have a way of becoming overreactions. An overreaction to clericalism and paternalism in the Church resulted in autonomy becoming absolute. Evelyn Underhill offered a helpful analogy in this regard. She likened the Church to the Post Office. Both provide an essential service, but it is always possible to find an incompetent and annoying clerk behind the counter. Persons who expect all representatives of the Church to live up to the ideals proposed by the Church will typically become disillusioned and leave. Persons with such expectations would have left the Church of the Holy Apostles.

Most recently, a cause for many leaving the Church is the scandal of clergy sexual abuse. This has been a stumbling block not only for those directly affected, but for Catholics generally. Because of the questionable role played by a number of bishops, their moral authority is diminished. The time when bishops could command is past. Now, they can only hope to persuade and invite. Loyalty to bishops had been widely identified with loyalty to the Church. As the former loyalty diminished, so did the latter. Clearly there are times when the Church is more of an obstacle than a help to faith. At Vatican II, the Council Fathers pointed out that the Church is always in danger of concealing, rather than revealing, the authentic features of Christ. Often enough, members of the Church's leadership have been guilty of a sin typical of many religious teachers—namely, being more concerned about preservation of their authority than about the truth.

While specific reasons can be cited, it is helpful to recognize several underlying attitudes that are operative. (1) There is an anti-dogmatic spirit which is suspicious of the Church's emphasis on fidelity to traditional teachings. (2) There is the widespread belief that one can be free to ignore, deny, or minimize one or more received doctrines without feeling compelled to break with the Church. (3) There is also the belief that, guided by their own conscience, regardless of how that matches—or fails to match—generally accepted Catholic teaching, persons can develop their

own understanding of what it means to be Catholic. Someone has coined a phrase that describes persons with those attitudes, calling them "cafeteria Catholics," i.e., those who pick and choose what to accept of official Catholic teaching and ignore the rest.

Two questions arise in the face of the phenomenon of "vanishing Catholics." One question is of a more theological and ecclesial level: are those departed to be considered heretics or schismatics? A second question arises at the practical level: how can those who have left be reunited with the Church? Regarding the first question, it is worth noting that, while speaking of dissension and division among the faithful, and of separation from the community of believers, the New Testament does not make a distinction between heresy and schism. Since the definition of the Pope's primacy of jurisdiction, it is difficult to see how there can be a schism that is not a heresy.

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§2089), heresy "is the obstinate, post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and Catholic faith, or it is, likewise, an obstinate doubt concerning the same." Schism is "the refusal of submission to the Roman Pontiff, or of communion with the members of the Church subject to him." *The Theological Dictionary*, compiled by Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, defines heresy as "primarily an error in matters of faith. The heretic takes a truth out of the organic whole, which is the faith, and because he looks at it in isolation, misunderstands it, or else denies a dogma." "Schism occurs when a baptized person refuses to be subject to the Pope, or to live in communion with the members of the Church, who are subject to the Pope."

In any case, given the variety of reasons for people leaving the Church, the degree of separation, and especially assuming good will on the part of those leaving, it is difficult to classify them as heretics or schismatics. Church authorities have the right and the duty to take measures against heresy and schism when those become evident. Clear denial of a dogma cannot be tolerated. But between this and a purely private, material heresy, there are many shades. Not every challenge to accepted theology is heretical. There are many partial non-identifications that endanger faith and unity but do not rise to the level of schism. Nor does every act of disobedience to human laws in the Church imply schism.

While speculative questions about heresy and schism are significant and need to be addressed, they pale in comparison to the practical question of how those departed can be reunited with the Church. That question is as complex as are the reasons for people leaving the Church. That question is further complicated when one addresses the question of the underlying attitudes that are operative.

Obviously, the Church must work at removing any obstacles to reunion. With Vatican II, that work was begun. The Council recognized the Church is *semper reformanda*, always needing to be reformed. The actual return of individuals requires something more than an adjustment in Church practices or new programs. It is a matter of God touching the individual with his grace.

A final question that can prove troubling is how the massive defection from the Church is to be reconciled with God's providence. This is simply one of many instances in which we are challenged to believe in an omnipotent God, who is also a loving, provident Father. Providence is not an occasional, intrusive, manipulative presence, but one that is with us both in tragedy and in joy, in the joy that consists not so much in the absence of suffering, as in the awareness of God's presence. To find the strength to experience calmly the difficulties and trials that come into our lives is a tremendous challenge. If, however, we are able to do that, every event can be "providential." In a sermon on the feast of the Ascension, Pope Leo the Great said: "For those who abandon themselves to God's providential love, faith does not fail, hope is not shaken, and charity does not grow cold."

There can be a very subtle, almost imperceptible temptation to think we know better than God how things should be. We can be like the naive little girl, who, in her prayers, told God that if she were in God's place, she would make the world better. And God replied: "That is exactly what you should be doing."



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THERE WILL BE NO MASS & HOLY HOUR:

Fr. Charles on 4-days of holiday: Tues., Jan. 7, Wed., Jan. 8, Thurs., Jan. 9 & Fri., Jan. 10, 2014

PARISH WEEKLY COLLECTION UPDATE:

- WEEKLY COST OF RUNNING OUR PARISH - \$7768
- SUNDAY, DECEMBER 22ND OFFERTORY COLLECTION**
- Envelopes, Loose bills and change - \$5020
- Pre-Authorized Giving (PAP) - \$1544 (November)
- ➔ TOTAL COLLECTION LAST WEEK: \$6564
- ➔ **Deficit in last week's collection: \$1204**

MASS INTENTIONS

Sat., Jan. 11, 2014 – 5:00 pm – Rosalia Reyes+ Req. by the Reyes Family
Sun., Jan. 12, 2014 – 9:00 am – Mass
Sun., Jan. 12, 2014 – 11:00 am – Eugenio Spina+ Req. by Peter & Linda Vachon

Nine Words – JOY – How does Jesus bring joy to your life?

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