

On Being a Cafeteria Catholic by Dr. Ronald Modras^{1/}

“Why do you stay in the Church?”

My theology class that morning was dealing with Christianity as a Jewish sect accommodating to the Roman Empire’s Hellenistic culture. The question was not on topic and caught me off guard. But I knew it was sincere and that the college senior who posed it was a Catholic struggling to make sense of his own relationship to the Church. His classmates, a mix of Christians, Muslims, and self-professed agnostics, suddenly became quiet and more interested than usual.

“Well,” I answered after a few moments pause, “I stay in the Church because I believe I have experienced it in that Absolute Mystery, that Power and Presence, we call God. I believe that Jesus best represents that Absolute Mystery for me, that he reveals the human face of God. Yes, I admit that the Catholic Church is in many ways like a dysfunctional family, with its fair share of horse thieves and crazy uncles. But it’s my family. And because it is my family, I can criticize it, which I couldn’t do if I went to some other church with its own problems and reasons for complaint.”

With words to this effect – and no small thanks to Karl Rahner, I satisfied the questioner and the class went back to discussing Hellenistic culture. It is only looking back at that morning that I found myself grateful I was not asked a follow-up question, “*How* do you stay in the Church?” At one time I might have answered, by being a “Vatican II or a *Commonweal* Catholic.” Today, though, some might say that I should be ashamed to admit it, I would have to answer, “By being a *Cafeteria Catholic*.”

The cafeteria metaphor has been in use for several years already to criticize Catholics like me who presume to question official Church teachings on a variety of matters, originally birth control, but now also, such disparate issues as women’s ordination, civil unions for gays, and embryonic stem cell research. Cafeteria Catholics are said to select those Church teachings that suite their tastes and disregard those that don’t. Because picking and choosing lies at the etymological root of the Greek word for heresy, the analogy proved provocative enough to arouse a defense from the left. Not a denial, so much as a claim that we are all Cafeteria Catholics, that politically conservative Catholics also pick and choose when it come to church teaching on social justice issues, like war, immigration and capital punishment. To which the right replies that there is an essential difference between war and the death penalty, which can at times be justified, and intrinsically evil actions, like abortion and embryonic stem, cell research, which can never be justified.

The Cafeteria Catholic phenomenon, if not the phrase itself, received national attention when a majority of Catholics helped elect pro-choice presidential candidate, Barak Obama, then again when Notre Dame University chose to grant him an honorary doctor of laws degree. When scores of bishops went public in expressing their profound dismay, Catholics like me have begun to wonder if they are trying to make the Church into the Republican Party at prayer. Barring a sea change in political landscape, Cafeteria Catholicism shows no signs of letting up. And if the 2008 election results are any indication, the bishops will once again find themselves more aligned with Evangelical Protestants than their own people in the pew. That deserves reflection and raises more questions than I have answers for.

What’s being identified as Cafeteria Catholicism encompasses several quite serious concerns, not the least being the moral authority of the bishops, the personal integrity of Catholics who disagree with them, the identity of Catholic colleges and universities, and the whole question of Church teaching on complicated moral issues serving as a litmus test for Catholic loyalty. The deep disconnect between bishops and sizeable numbers of laity raises questions about the state of American Catholicism today. Are we witnessing what some have called a “virtual schism?” In choosing to stay, are we kidding ourselves? Sizeable numbers of like-minded Catholics have opted out. Are they being more honest?

According to a 2008 Pew survey, one out of ten adult Americans is a former Catholic. For every new convert who came into the Church, four left, fourteen percent of them becoming totally unaffiliated from all religion. Most of that group left before the age of twenty-four, about half of them over Church teaching

on birth control, forty percent over the Church's treatment of women. What keep the Cafeteria Catholics among the sixty-eight percent who stay? Is it simply old habits dying hard? Or hope springing eternal for another Blesses John XXIII? Evidence indicates a solid attachment to the Eucharist. And, as I answered that college senior, for many of us a sense of proprietorship: it's our Church too, not just the bishops'.

More than most of his colleagues, Denver's Archbishop Charles Chaput has given significant time and thought to the topic. His approach has been to appeal to both sides of the spectrum. He enjoins Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia and Catholics on the right to accept Church teaching on the death penalty; to Vice-President Joe Biden, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and us on the left his charge is to accept Church teachings on abortion, embryonic stem cell research, and civil unions for gays. Like most Catholics who have written in the topic, he makes the assumption that Cafeteria Catholicism encompasses only those pelvic issues at the heart of the culture wars. He also assumes that bishops are not guilty of their own selectivity.

Though the analogy is intended to be disparaging, there are aspects to it I find peculiarly apt. Cafeterias typically make a variety of offerings available, more than one person can put on a tray, some of them appealing, others that appear moldy or stale. Catholic tradition has always been more of a cafeteria than a one-dish supper. The pluralism that marked New Testament Christianity – four gospels, varieties of ministries – increased as the Church spread across the Hellenized Roman Empire and became Catholic. Over the course of two thousand years, Catholicism has come to be characterized by more traditions, practices, and spiritualities than any person can manage. Surveying the variety, you can't help but discriminate. Some offerings you select with gusto. Others you pass by, not sure what they are or whether the passage of time has rendered them long past palatable. The point I want to pass here is that the cafeteria analogy that describes the Catholic Church today encompasses more than the hot-button moral issues usually associated with it.

Ascetical Practices and their Reasons

I first began thinking seriously about Cafeteria Catholicism in the spring of 2008, when I witnessed the penitential processions that mark Holy Week in Spain. With thousands of onlookers lining the streets of Madrid, I watched as men in robes, their faces shrouded in hoods, shouldered heavy platforms carrying images of the bruised and bleeding Christ and his Sorrowful Mother. For many of them, this was a family tradition going back generations. The weight of the platform digging into their shoulders evoked the pain Jesus suffered when he carried the cross. Tenderfoot that I am, however, it was not this macho expression of faith that caused me to shudder so much as that of women, similarly robed and hooded, with shackles And chains around their ankles, processing on the cold, rough-hewn cobblestone streets of Madrid, barefoot.

Viewing the hooded penitents, I recalled the regular recurring newspaper stories about how someone in the Philippines having himself nailed to the cross on Good Friday. Were such extreme demonstrations of faith and asceticism peculiar to Spain and its former colonies? Then, St. Simon Stylites came to mind, the fifth century ascetic who lived for thirty-seven years on top of a pillar in Syria. And St. Patrick's Purgatory in Ireland, where pilgrims still come to fast, keep all night vigils, and walk barefoot among the ruins. Until they got out of hand, the medieval popes tolerated the flagellants, the band of penitents that would make public displays of whipping themselves until blood flowed. But self-scourging did not go out with the Middle Ages. Nor, as suggested by *The Da Vinci Code*, has it been peculiar to members of Opus Dei. Well into the twentieth century, "taking the discipline," as it is called, was routine for a variety of men and women in religious life.

For laity too, including school children, offering pain or discomfort "for the Poor Souls in Purgatory" was a regular part of Catholic piety before Vatican II. But like the hair shirts and "the discipline," it has fallen out of favor and become part of the cafeteria that most of us now prefer to ignore. Is this a loss of devotion? Is it one more piece of evidence that U.S. Catholics after Vatican II have become soft and bourgeois? I would agree that it has as much to do with the theology that rationalized such ascetical practices.

Fasting and self-denial, like sack cloth and ashes, predate Christianity. And the reasons for ascetical practice vary with the religious traditions that practiced it. Jews fast on Yom Kippur and Muslims on Ramadan on the basis of a direct divine command. Catholics observe self-denial in Lent in preparation for Easter and in imitation of Jesus' forty days in the desert. Catholic tradition also justifies fasting and self-denial as a way of entering into solidarity with the poor and experiencing the hunger they feel everyday.

But the cafeteria that is Catholic tradition has also included darker reasons for asceticism. Rejecting the pagan ascetics who regarded the body as evil, the early Church succumbed to that aspect of Greek culture that saw the body as inferior and dangerous to the soul. The body had to be beaten down and subjected. Pleasure, emotion, and desire were all to be curbed if not crushed by self-denial. When Catholics in medieval Europe came to the conclusion that Jesus was born to die, there followed the problematic view that in the divine scheme of things, salvation only comes with suffering. God requires pain as the price for forgiveness. Embrace sackcloth and ashes for your sins before God does something worse for you.

This kind of thinking can be understood and perhaps even excused within the context of the Middle Ages. But most Vatican II Catholics have found better ways of following Christ than seeking out pain or viewing suffering as somehow redemptive in itself. We see Jesus as being born to live, his passion and death as a culmination of a life lived for others. We opt today for asceticism that does social justice rather than self-affliction that seeks to alleviate another's pain, not justify it. We choose to dispense with what we now regard as ascetical extremes and attempts to justify them.

What it means to take up your cross and follow Christ is at the heart of what it means to be Christian, but a critical reader might rightfully note that none of these ascetical practices or the reasons behind them were ever official Catholic teaching. They were never raised to the level of dogma. But there are dogmas too that Cafeteria Catholics find problematic, at least with their traditional popular interpretation. Pope John XXIII and Vatican II after him made a critical distinction between the substance of Catholic doctrine and the manner of its formulation. That distinction was apparently lost on the authors of the (1997) *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, at least when it comes to what it has to say about human origins and original sin.

The Bible, Science and Original Sin

In promulgating the *Catechism*, Pope John Paul II described it as a "complete exposition of Catholic doctrine" for anyone "who wants to know what the Catholic Church believes." He hailed its contents for their "timelessness" and ability to answer "the questions of our age." That papal endorsement has persuaded conservative Catholics to regard the *Catechism* as above criticism and wield it as a weapon against "liberal" Catholics they wish to tar as unorthodox. Whether the *Catechism* comes up to that level of authority can best be seen by looking at what it says about creation and original sin.

For at least two generations now, students in Catholic colleges, and even high schools, have been exposed to the results of modern biblical scholarship. They have been taught that the Bible contains literature, not just history. Our students have read about the symbolic character of the two creation accounts in the first three chapters of Genesis and learned that these mythic stories about creation in six days, Adam, Eve, the forbidden fruit and talking snake all have important things to say about us, our world, human dignity and the human condition. But they are not to be taken literally. Unlike fundamental Protestants, students in Catholic high schools and colleges have not had to choose between the Bible and science or the evidence for evolution with respect to human origins.

The authors of the *Catholic Catechism* were not biblical fundamentalists. They acknowledge that science has contributed to our knowledge of the age and size of the universe, the evolution of life, and the advent of human beings (283). In their treatment of creation they recognize the "symbolism of biblical language" (375). But then, for some reason, they go on to limit the symbolism to creation in six days and the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil." The *Catechism* ignores the possibility that everything found in the two

creation stories is symbolic. Irish priest and theologian Gabriel Daly put it incisively: “The greater part of what appears in these pages could have been written hundreds of years ago. It is as if the modern world had not posed any significantly new questions for Christian faith.”

Why does the *Catechism* limit the symbolism in the Genesis myths to creation in six days and the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil?” It would seem that neither had been raised to the level of a dogma. The same cannot be said for Adam, Eve, their situation in the Garden of Eden, or their act of disobedience to God’s command. All these formed the basis for the sixteenth century Council of Trent defining the doctrine of original sin. For the authors of the *Catholic Catechism*, the “symbolism of biblical language” was apparently easier to acknowledge than the symbolism of a dogma.

The doctrine of original sin, as we have it, goes back to St. Augustine of Hippo (+430). Once he gave up on the Manichean dualism of his youth and embraced Christianity, Augustine thought long and hard on where evil came from. He pondered how to justify the existence and ways of a good and loving God before such evils as we would regard the suffering of innocent children. Augustine’s answer was that there were no innocent children, that as Adam’s offspring, we were all born sinners, a *massa damnata* deserving only of hell. For Augustine Adam and Eve were real persons, their disobedience to God’s command was an historical event of catastrophic proportions that implicated all of humankind. As the offspring of Adam’s loins, all of us were born sinners, deprived of the divine grace we would have enjoyed otherwise. If not for that event, we humans would have been immortal and free from pain and unruly desires. Because of it, we are subjected to pain and death.

Given their pre-scientific times and the limitation of their knowledge, no one can blame St. Augustine or the bishops at the Council of Trent for thinking that the Genesis myths were history. The twentieth century authors of the *Catholic Catechism*, however, had no such excuse. They merely repeated the teaching of Trent (400), as if nothing had happened in the last four hundred years, as if neither biblical studies nor scientific discovery had made any difference. What happens to a doctrine like original sin when its biblical underpinnings are removed? Or when science offers a quite different account of human origins? Five year olds today read about dinosaurs and fifteen year olds study about fossils in science class. Are Catholic educators seriously expected to teach high school and college students that when *homo sapiens* evolved on the savannas of Africa, its first representatives were immortal? Did not suffer pain? Were not affected by testosterone?

This is not to dismiss the doctrine of original sin or to deny the insights into the human condition provided by the Genesis creation stories. The sin of Adam (Hebrew for humankind) can be interpreted as the story not about an individual but about us, that human nature needs healing even rationalist Immanuel Kant found reasonable, impressed by Rochefoucault’s insight that “there is something in us that does not mourn the misfortune of our dearest friend.” There is more to sin than individual acts. There is a social dimension to sin, unjust social structures that makes us participants in exploitation whenever we enjoy low prices at the expense of someone else’s low wages. There is an historical dimension to sin, as the wrongs of times past live on to nurture resentments and hatred. Theologians after Vatican II had been thinking and writing along these lines, any of which could have been used by authors of the *Catechism* to make their treatment of original sin meaningful. They chose not to.

Former theology professor and Prefect of the congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was not oblivious to these flaws in the *Catechism*. Before his election as pope, he mused about retiring from the Vatican and returning to his books to reflect and write on the doctrine of original sin. He recognized that the doctrine needed radical reinterpretation. Commenting in 1968 on the notion of the first human beings being immune from death, he wrote: “This thesis in its classical dogmatic form is scarcely intelligible in present day thought.” But it could be rendered intelligible, he continued, if one interpreted it existentially and distinguished between death as a natural phenomenon and death as a personal category of human life. Ratzinger was reflecting here on the Second Vatican Council and the fact that bishops were aware of the debates among theologians regarding “the original state of man and original sin.” He makes the very significant point that at Vatican II, “there was agreement that the essential content of Trent cannot be abandoned, but that *theology must be left free to inquire afresh precisely what that essential content is.*”

The significance of those two statements can hardly be overstated. The dogma of original sin as we have it is “unintelligible to present day thought.” It contains truth that cannot be abandoned, but theologians and bishops are not agreed as to what it is. Stunning too are the implications that logically follow such an acknowledgment. For if this is the case for original sin, could it not be the same for other doctrines too? I we are not sure as to the meaning of original sin, what does it mean to say that Jesus’ Mother was preserved from it? What does it mean to say that Baptism takes it away? Clearly, there are more dogmas than that of the Holy Trinity that we twenty-first Catholics do not fathom. We don’t deny that there is truth in them; we just are not sure what it is. And if we don’t understand them, they can hardly enter deeply into our consciousness. So we just don’t make much ado about them.

Perhaps this is why creeds and doctrines are no longer the litmus test of orthodoxy they once were. Moral issues and legislative efforts on their behalf are what inflame passions and split churches now – none more so than Catholic pro-life efforts to criminalize abortion and outlaw embryonic stem cell research, declaring human life from the moment of its conception to be inviolable. Here picking and choosing is declared unconscionable

Abortion, Intrinsic Evil and Authority

I find most Cafeteria Catholics like myself to be pro-life. We respect the dignity of human persons at all stages of life and support Church teaching and condemn human cloning, genetic engineering and euthanasia. Surveys and election returns alike seem to indicate that most U.S. Catholics are uncomfortable with the certitudes at both extremes of the abortion debate, including extremist positions taken by leaders in the Church. We have questions when something happens like to controversial March 2009 abortion and excommunication in Recife, Brazil.

As reported in the media, after years of being repeatedly raped by her step-father, a nine year old girl was discovered to be pregnant with twins. The girl was in her fourth month, and there was doubt, given her size, that she could bring the pregnancy to term safely. Abortion is illegal in Brazil, but it is allowed in cases of rape or danger to the mother’s life, exceptions to which Brazil’s bishops object strenuously. The girl’s mother arranged for her to have an abortion. The Cardinal Archbishop of Recife, Jose Cardoso Sobrinho, publicly declared that the girl’s mother was excommunicated – though not the girl herself, because she was a minor. The doctors and all who worked on the abortion were also declared excommunicated.

In response to the outcry throughout Brazil, the Archbishop explained that he did not level the excommunication himself, that it was automatic. The uproar continued as one high-ranking Vatican Cardinal came to the Archbishop’s defense and another criticized him for lack of sensitivity. When secular media outlets pointed out that the one person not excommunicated in this case was the step-father rapist, the Archbishop explained that abortion is a graver act than rape.

Reactions to this news story reveal the fault lines that mark the Catholic Church today. While Cafeteria Catholics in Brazil and the U.S. found the Archbishop’s behavior outrageous, the pro-life movement honored him with an international award, and the U.S. bishops and Catholic press in the U.S. were notable for their silence. Why the lack of comment? Shouldn’t the Archbishop be held up as a model for his courage as a defender of human life? Or is he symptomatic of an extreme? If abortion warrants automatic excommunication, why doesn’t rape? Why is it that if a woman is raped and takes the “morning-after pill” to terminate a possible pregnancy, she is excommunicated, but her rapist is not? Why is the morning-after pill regarded as an abortion?

The answers to questions like these find their most recent (2008) articulation in an instruction by the Vatican’s congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) on bioethics, *Dignitas Personae*: “The body of a human being, from the very first stages of its existence, can never be reduced merely to a group of cells.” From the moment of conception, a fertilized ovum demands “unconditional respect” and is to be “treated as a person” with “the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life.” It is the qualifying adjectives in statements like the one above that give me pause, words like “unconditional” and

“inviolable.” One can agree that a fertilized ovum is not “merely” a group of cells. But it is a group of cells. One can agree that those cells call for respect. But “unconditional respect?”

If from the moment of conception a fertilized ovum enjoys the rights of personhood and should be treated as a human person, it follows that every abortion is murder and that women who have abortions and the physicians who perform them should be punished as murderers. Why do we find that kind of language extreme? Hard cases make bad law and any questions raised about exceptions to the absolutist pro-life position raise the specter of a slippery slope. Still, hard cases, like that in Recife, indicate the limitations of law, above all when claims are made that an action like abortion is an “intrinsic evil” that cannot be justified by any circumstances or good intention, that its prohibition is “unconditional.”

Just how unconditional the stance of Catholic leadership is on abortion is demonstrated by the hard case of ectopic pregnancies, when the ovum implants someplace other than the uterus, usually one of the fallopian tubes. An ectopic pregnancy constitutes a medical emergency, one that leads to certain death of the embryo and that, if not treated in time, can lead to the death of the expectant mother. So as not to diminish a woman’s chances of giving birth in the future, medical practice is able to remove the pregnancy with drugs or surgery without affecting the fallopian tube. The Vatican has ruled, however, that this is a direct abortion and an intrinsic evil even though the embryo has no chance of survival. The official Catholic solution is to regard the fallopian tube as diseased and to allow it to be excised, without the abortion of the pregnancy following as an indirect (unintended) secondary effect. Conservative Catholic justification for this approach to ectopic pregnancies is that it is based on subtle moral reasoning and principle. A less kind appraisal is that it is based on fiction, that the fallopian tube is not diseased, and that Church leaders regard the unconditional nature of its moral stance as more important than a woman’s prospect for future motherhood.

For Cafeteria Catholics like me, it is not respect for life that is problematic here but the moral reasoning that declares the act intrinsically evil without consideration of circumstances or consequences. I can agree that abortion, like war, is always evil. But sometimes one has no good options and must choose between two evils. Can abortion ever be the lesser of two evils? Not even to address an ectopic pregnancy? Not even the morning after rape? The Late Pope John Paul II rejected this kind of questioning and moral reasoning that looks at context or consequences. Pope Benedict XVI and the CDF follow suit. But one looks in vain in their instructions for arguments to prove their point – just as one looks in vain for arguments that a fertilized egg is a person. The pope and the CDF simply cite themselves, making their argument one from authority.

The claim has been raised that its defense of unborn human life is consistent with the Church’s defense of the poor and marginalized in society. But in their criticism of pro-choice politicians who embrace Catholic social teaching, the bishops have made it clear that abortion “trumps” all other social concerns – that war, capital punishment, unjust social structures that harm the poor are not intrinsically evil the way abortion is. It appears to me that the Catholic stance against abortion as an intrinsic evil is rather more analogous to the Church’s stance against masturbation, artificial conception, and sexual acts between homosexuals. The *Catholic Catechism* condemns them all using the same language: masturbation is an “intrinsically and gravely disordered action” (2352); homosexual acts are “intrinsically disordered” (2357); artificial birth control is “intrinsically evil” (2370).

Whence such certitude that these acts are all unconditionally evil, and why do so many of us Cafeteria Catholics find it difficult to share it? We have some idea from the context behind *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI’s (1968) birth control encyclical. In a situation of divergence of opinion, a small group of conservative cardinals convinced the pope that the Church could not change its position. They argued that in 1930, after the Anglican bishops determined that artificial contraception could sometimes be justified, Pope Pius XI issues an encyclical condemning that contention. To change Catholic teaching on birth control thirty years later, argued the cardinals, would be to say that the Holy Spirit had guided the Anglican bishops in 1930 and not the pope. Not surprisingly, the argument that convinced Pope Paul VI has had less success convincing most of the Catholic faithful.

Maneuvering Our Trays

Respect for the papacy and Church teaching is part of Catholic identity. In the case of dogmas like original sin, Cafeteria Catholics can consent to a truth beneath the outdated formulas and wait to find out what it is. But the same way we question certain ascetical practices and their justifications, we find it now difficult not to question our Church leaders when their teachings on moral issues rubs against our own personal experience and makes unconditional claims we find extreme. We do not deny the pope's or the bishops' authority. We can acquiesce to their being shepherds without regarding ourselves as sheep.

So without publicly dissenting, we discriminate, maneuvering our trays as best we can, saddened but understanding when others like us walk out. When fortunate enough to find parishes that are truly Christian communities with inspiring worship and a social conscience, we choose to remain in this human, all-too-human Church of sinners, where we have also encountered saints. In this family of ours, we have experienced that Absolute Mystery we call God, and to the best of our lights, we follow the Christ who reveals for us the human face of God. And to those who fault us for selecting more or differently from them we say, "It's our Church too!"

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Dr. Modras has lectured widely throughout the United States, as well as at the universities of Oxford, Berlin, and Jerusalem. In 1989, he received the Micah Award of the St. Louis Chapter of the American Jewish Committee and was named a Fellow of the Annenberg Research Institute. His 1994 book, "The Catholic Church and Antisemitism: Poland, 1933 to 1939," received the College Theology Society Book of the Year Award and has been translated into Polish. He has lectured widely throughout the United States, as well as at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Oxford University and the University of Berlin. He resides in St. Louis with his wife, Mary Elizabeth Hogan, Ph.D., associate dean of Saint Louis University's College of Arts and Sciences.