

WHAT KEEPS US CATHOLIC?

40 REASONS
to feel good about our faith

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INTRODUCTION

After several enthusiastic invites from a student's mother, I finally accepted her invitation to attend a large, nondenominational church with their family. This was a good "Catholic" family, mind you, with years of both local parish involvement and Catholic education. Yet not only had my student stopped practicing Catholicism, she and her family were now committed to this other faith community.

Talking with colleagues about the upcoming trip and the phenomenon of Protestant megachurches, our conversations were quick to describe these places as "theology lite" or "all entertainment, no substance." However, once I was there, I was impressed by the number of volunteers, and I felt a sense of community. These were people who, despite the size of the church, knew each other and were excited to be there. The free coffee didn't hurt either.

As the service began the pastor shared with the community something that he had never done before and something that he thought, given his personality, was next to impossible—he'd

just been on a silent retreat. It was at a place several hours south, just outside Bardstown, Kentucky—the Abbey of Gethsemani. During his retreat, he was introduced to the thought and writings of Thomas Merton, the famous Trappist monk and the most noted American Catholic spiritual writer of the twentieth century. He asked the congregation, “Anybody ever heard of Thomas Merton?” At least half the hands went up.

As much as I wanted to believe that Thomas Merton’s person and writings had transcended religious boundaries (which they have, given the continued popularity of his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and other books by or about him), I presumed that most of the people who raised their hands, like the family I had come with, were former Catholics. According to a survey published several years ago by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, I had reason to believe this. The survey showed that approximately one-third of the respondents who were raised Catholic no longer describe themselves as Catholic. Across the general population this means that nearly ten percent of all American adults are former Catholics. Sadly, for me, this statistic includes my older brother.

As much as I want to blame my brother and the family who invited me to church with them for some defect on their part for no longer practicing Catholicism, in the end, I must honor their experience. The reasons they (and countless others) left are multiple and very convincing—lack of hospitality and community, irrelevant and uninspiring liturgies, disagreement over church teachings, need for a personal relationship with God, abuse and scandal, irregular marriages, and more.

All of this has led me to an important and essential question: What keeps *me* Catholic? And better yet, what keeps *us* Catholic?

Most of us, over our lifetimes, have been given enough reasons to leave, and yet we stay. We love the church. It's our home...warts and all.

In the reflections that follow, I invite you to join me in voicing the reasons as to "what keeps us Catholic." This book answers that question by focusing on our strengths. In the process, I hope, we can confirm our commitment to this imperfect but very beautiful tradition. I'm sure my reasons—community, saints, prayer, Mass, parish, school, word of God, humor, sacramentality, and many more—will be echoed by yours.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Who is someone that you know who no longer practices their Catholic faith? As difficult as it may be, have you been able to talk with them about their decision?

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If asked for some words or phrases that describe Catholicism, what would you say?

GRATITUDE

I shouldn't complain, but I'm pretty good at it when I do. Especially about my family and childhood growing up. I'll spare you the details and offer the depressing highlights instead: frequent job changes, a heart-wrenching move on my tenth birthday, unemployment, divorce, bankruptcy, mental illness—not unlike many other families, I've come to find out.

Looking back on it all, though, rather than lamenting I'd rather focus on a gift that emerges among those hardships: my baptism into the Catholic tradition. Though my relationship with my parents has waned and withered, in this regard all I can say to them is, "Thank you." In good times and in bad, my Catholic faith has stayed with me all these years. Try as I may, I can't seem to get rid of it. In fact, through its graced worldview, being Catholic colors pretty much what I see, say, and do.

I remember when my oldest daughter celebrated her first reconciliation. Coming back to the pew, she had a relaxed smile on her face (I'm confident that all of her sins were venial ones). She drew near to me as I put my arm around her. After a few

minutes, she looked at me encouragingly and said, “Daddy, I think you should go get in line.” She quickly added, “I heard you and mommy fighting.”

Though there were five priests available to hear confessions, I had my eyes set on only one. Approaching him, a sense of gratitude overwhelmed me. Memories flooded back...living next door to him at college...his witnessing our marriage and baptizing one of our kids.... I asked for forgiveness for my failings as a husband and a father. After absolution we held each other for a few moments, at the end of which I said, “Thank you for your presence in my life.”

Hanging on the wall in my classroom is a saying that strikes me deeply. It is attributed to a medieval Dominican mystic, Meister Eckhart. It reads: “If the only prayer in life you say is ‘Thank You,’ that would suffice.” In light of it, I have often wondered what words or prayers my wife, children, students, and colleagues hear me offer. Are they selfless or selfish? Sadly, I think I already know the answer.

I’d like to blame it on the -isms of materialism, consumerism, and individualism. Ringing constantly in our ears are the messages of “You don’t have enough. Get some more,” and “Do it your way or no way.” We’d rather acquire possessions than acknowledge our gifts and emphasize our independence instead of admitting our need for others. Frustratingly, this leaves us in a constant state of dissatisfaction, always desiring more.

Jesuit John Kavanaugh once remarked that he thought that ingratitude, not disobedience, was the original sin. Adam and Eve had everything in the Garden. The snake’s deception was that of convincing them that they needed more. Unfortunately, that ruse worked.

Catholics have the antidotes to this attitude and lifestyle, though. They're called the Eucharist and the sacrament of reconciliation. The word "Eucharist" itself means "thanksgiving." In and through this sacramental gift—the very body and blood of Jesus the Christ—we are invited to say two words: "thank you." These words are hard to say and even more difficult to put into practice, however, until we recognize that who we are and what we have is gift. The language of "You owe me" and "I earned it" is foreign to Jesus. This is not what we say to one another at the table of the Lord, but "take, receive, share."

Likewise, through the sacrament of reconciliation, we humbly recognize and open ourselves up to the experience of God's mercy. The greatest gift found in developing a sense of gratitude is also its greatest challenge. For with gratitude we discover a God who is first and foremost love—a God who in spite of our envy and pride, dare we say ingratitude, always gives us another chance.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Recall a time when you truly experienced your faith as gift.

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Whom do you need to say "thank you" to?

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How do the sacraments of Eucharist and reconciliation help you live a life of greater gratitude?

WOMEN RELIGIOUS

A while back, wanting some gifts for our kids after a week's vacation away from them, my wife and I wandered into a toy store. Perusing the aisles, my "Catholic" eyes quickly caught a lunch box prominently displayed on a shelf.

On the lid was a Sister in full habit. With requisite ruler in hand, she was standing watch over a young girl who was writing the line, "I am personally responsible for the sins of the world" on the chalkboard. I passed on the purchase.

Getting ready to check out, for sale at the cash register was the real showstopper—Nunzilla. When wound up, it spit sparks of fire and waddled like a penguin. Though limited in its portrayal of women religious, it pictured a prominent stereotype very well. Not only have Sisters long been a staple Halloween costume, but they also have entered the elite world of novelty items. No small feat!

Juxtaposed with these examples, however, is another (and I believe truer) image of women religious. Over the years, my school has had its annual retreat at the motherhouse of the

Congregation of Divine Providence in northern Kentucky. You may remember it was made famous by the movie *Rain Man* and Dustin Hoffman's and Tom Cruise's long walk down its driveway of towering oaks.

I'm not drawn to that natural, yet imposing, image as much as to the community's cemetery. It is located on a small embankment out back of the motherhouse. Fanning out from a statue of the crucified Christ in the center are row upon row of headstones—plain, sand-colored crosses. All that's on them is a name and date of death. They are simple, almost understated, testaments to a life of service, most of it unrecognized and little rewarded. The first one dates from May 23, 1892. In all, more than two hundred fifty of the Sisters are buried there.

It is, to say the least, an impressive sight—these holy women, this cloud of witnesses, who have preceded us in faith.

Seeing them, one is reminded of the foundational role that women religious have played in both America's and the church's history. Arriving in 1727, they found harassment, suspicion, even outright bigotry, in a country then fearful of all things Catholic.

Despite this, these "pioneering" women persevered and established a parochial school system that continues to educate hundreds of thousands of students annually. Likewise, their initial attempts to care for the sick and needy developed into the highly professional and esteemed Catholic health care system of today. In short, at a time when the larger culture, even the church, was saying that a woman's place was only in the home, women religious were demonstrating that the world was where they belonged.

Summarized briefly: they have been faithful—to their con-

sciences, their vows, their communities, the Catholic church, and the gospel of Jesus the Christ. Sure, we can all offer a Sister or nun who meets the supposed popular culture caricature, but we also know better. With limited means yet unbounded in determination and devotion, they “faithed” the American Catholic church into being.

Though reduced in numbers today, women religious continue to extend their mission and values to the church and world as spiritual directors and chaplains, teachers and writers, social workers and hospital administrators, activists and missionaries, and still others. As one woman religious recently stated, looking at the past and current state of their life, “I come to praise this life, not bury it.”

Count me as another one who is here to praise and celebrate this life.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

*How has your life been touched, directly or indirectly,
by the ministry of women religious?*

VATICAN II

It comes with the season. Summer is hot here. As the temperatures rise, people seek refuge in their homes. They close their windows and crank up their air conditioners. Thankfully, fall arrives. With it, people are finally able to open their windows again and enjoy the outdoors. No longer do they need to protect themselves from the scorching sun and blazing heat.

This “opening of windows” scenario is also a central image of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). When Pope Saint John XXIII announced that he was convening an ecumenical council, many people, having never experienced one, didn’t know what to think.

Trying his best to explain what “aggiornamento” meant to a group of bishops, the pope sensed that his words about church renewal and responding to the “signs of the times” were falling on deaf ears. To better illustrate what “bringing up to date” entailed, Pope John went to the nearest window, opened it, and said, “The church needs to let in some fresh air.”

The Catholic church gathered in council to look at who

it was, both internally and externally. Some saw only decay, destruction, and death. To this, John XXIII, who was canonized by Pope Francis in 2014, said, “We feel we must disagree with these prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand.” Rather than avoid the world as a den of iniquity, the Catholic church at the Second Vatican Council embraced it as a graced community, placing itself at the service of all of humanity, whom it sought to make more whole through Jesus the Christ.

This conciliar sentiment is most vividly expressed in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*). Its introduction, though written decades ago, still reads as if the ink is wet: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.”

Born in 1968, I am a child and student of the Council. All of my religious formation has been done in its light. This includes, as Cardinal Avery Dulles noted, an openness to the modern world, the “reformability” of the church, renewed attention to Scripture, the practice of collegiality at all levels of the church, an appreciation of diversity within the church (unity, yes; uniformity, no), the active role of the laity, reaffirmation of religious liberty, desire for better ecumenical relations with non-Catholics and dialogue with other faiths, and working for a more just world.

I have a firm commitment to the reforms of the Council. I also recognize the need to appreciate what came before me in faith. *Ressourcement* (a return to the sources) and *aggiorna-*

mento (updating or renewal), two words that characterize the substance of Vatican II, aren't opposed to one another but complementary. In order to go forward, we must be mindful of the past. Likewise, if the past is to have any relevance, its spiritual wisdom must be integrated into the lived experienced of believers. As Pope John stressed, "We're not here to guard a museum, but to cultivate a flourishing garden of life."

Catholicism, then, is never "either/or"—letter or spirit, continuity or discontinuity, *ressourcement* or *aggiornamento*—but always "both/and." When balanced well, Catholicism is a living tradition. The Second Vatican Council helps the church to live now and into the future.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

As referenced by Cardinal Dulles, which of the themes of Vatican II most resonates with your faith?

How does the church help you respond to "the signs of the times" in service to the world?