

The Great Disaffiliation Part III.

Where are they going?

In the first two articles in this series an attempt has been made to identify and examine the causes for the mass disengagement of Catholics from regular Faith practice. The haemorrhage, especially the 1950s has been catastrophic, especially in the developed world. In Australia, the national average of Catholics regularly practicing the Faith through parish engagement is around 10.6%. It is relatively easy to determine how many Catholics have disengaged from Faith practice, a little more difficult to determine exactly why they have done so but finding out where they go afterwards, if anywhere, is another story.

While there is a large amount of information about the numbers of Catholics disengaging from faith practice and even reasons why they have disaffiliated, there is very little information about where, if anywhere, they go when they do exit. There are a couple of exceptions to this. There is a growing body of literature about the migration of disaffected Catholics in Latin America and North America who have joined other mainstream Christian Churches or ecclesial communities.

Latin America

A very real cause for concern, even alarm, for the Latin American Church leadership in recent years is the large scale defection away from the Catholic faith practice. Evangelicals such as the Assemblies of God are winning the enculturation stakes by highlighting the sense of the immediacy in religious experience and faith relationship with God and others. Increasingly, Latin Americans have come to look unfavourably at Catholic ritual which highlights the sense of distance between the priest mediator and the people. (1).

Faith practice is badly affected in some very traditionally Catholic countries:

“Latin America is still the world’s biggest bastion of Catholicism. About 40% of the world’s Roman Catholics live there. Brazil has the most; Mexico, smaller but more devout, is not far behind, with 93%. Mexico City’s Basilica of Our Lady the Virgin of Guadalupe vies with St Peter’s in Rome as the world’s most-visited Catholic Church. But faith is fading. In 1970, 96% of Mexicans and 92% of Brazilians said they were Catholic. By 2010 the figures were 83% and 65%. In Central America the church’s decline is stronger still: its share has slipped below half in Honduras and is not far behind in El Salvador and Nicaragua. (2)

“Perhaps the most depressing chapter is one where we hear not numbers like these, but the actual words of some of these younger should-be Catholics, a small sample of whom the authors interviewed in 2008. Most were “out,” considering themselves estranged from the church or no longer Catholic, and only twelve met an expansive definition of “active.” For everyone, active and not, “church” seems associated primarily with morals and obligatory Mass attendance rather than anything that sounds like Jesus and the Gospel.” (3)

Perhaps, at another level, Latin American Catholics have just woken up to what their brothers and sisters in Spain rebelled against after the demise of the Franco-fascist regime. The

Spanish political system had for centuries elevated the Catholic Church to protected and preferred status in return for its spiritual and moral support. To that extent, it had been reduced to ideology and its clergy the servants of its bureaucracy.

The United States

The Catholic Church in the U.S. has experienced the same leaching effects of secularism on its participation rates over the past fifty or sixty years as elsewhere in the West. Large numbers of Catholics in the U.S. who have not been active 'Church people' for a long time, if ever, are now simply calling themselves "Christians." This is certainly a challenge to the stereotype of Americans as being a members of a deeply religious culture. Cathy Lynn Grossman offers commentary:

"If you're dismayed that one in five Americans (20 percent) are "nones" -- people who claim no particular religious identity -- brace yourself. How does 38 percent sound?"

That's what religion researcher David Kinnaman calculates when he adds "the unchurched, the never-churched and the skeptics" to the nones.

He calls his new category "churchless," the same title Kinnaman has given his new book. By his count, roughly four in 10 people living in the continental United States are actually "post-Christian" and "essentially secular in belief and practice."

If asked, the "churchless" would likely check the "Christian" box on a survey, even though they may not have darkened the door of a church in years." (4)

The US Catholic bishops have become increasingly disturbed about the large numbers of Latinos who have left the Church and migrated elsewhere. Recent Pew research paints an interesting picture of the gravitational influences exerted on Latino Catholics. Specifically they are the Evangelical Churches or straight-out disaffiliation. (5)

Another reason for the US Bishops' concern is that the Latinos are losing the passive acquiescence and obedience to the directives of Church officials formerly presumed of them. Examples of this new found independence are the scale of their acceptance of *Obamacare* and the crucial support they gave Obama in his successful second election campaign.

Australia and Secular Humanism

Beyond the national Census data there is very little published indications as to where Australians disengaging from Faith practice, migrate to spiritually after they move away. Many appear to maintain some kind of loose, amorphous, dogma free connection with Catholic identity and practice through a residual tribal loyalty. For disconnected/ disaffiliated former Catholics, their final "spiritual" home seems to be in the most decent expressions of secular humanism. (6)

This would invite some serious reflection on the part of Catholic leadership as to what extent these decent secular humanistic values intersect with those imbedded in the Gospel. The

success of early Christianity in spreading the Faith was not in forcing the Gospel on the host culture but by quietly and patiently insinuating the Gospel into those areas where common ground could be identified.

Years ago E.R. Dodds, in his *Pagan and Christian in an age of anxiety* (1980-2010), wrote that, for the most part, Christians and their non-Christian neighbours shared many common deep non-faith based human values. They understood and appreciated the lasting goodness of decency and deep, enduring aspirations. Despite the prevailing cultural determinism and pessimism Christian and non-believer often shared a common spirit of hopefulness.

More recently, Czech theologian and social philosopher, Tomas Halik has been insisting that this shared common ground of what is humanly decent and altruistic is the right place to begin a conversation between believers and those of little or no faith. This, he claims, is exactly what Pope Francis is suggesting:

Pope Francis, Halik said, is taking things a step further (than Benedict) by reaching beyond the academic community, insisting that Jesus is knocking at the door of Catholic churches asking to be let out into the world. It is a call to all Catholics to reach out to those seeking meaning, truth, beauty and justice. At the same time, however, it is also an invitation to be willing to learn more about God from the seekers' questions and experience.

"We cannot be just arrogant owners of the truth," he said. "We must be seekers for the seekers, with the seekers." (7)

A fruitful engagement between the Church's evangelical outreach and the disaffiliated should be sort in the sense of inquiry, searching and restlessness which are just as much the lot of convinced Catholic believers as those who have left the pews in their search for belonging.

One of George Pell's favourites used at religious education conferences but at conservative Catholic rallies in particular is his insistence on a strong doctrinal and apologetics component in Catholic education. He argues rightly that if people chose to abandon the practice of their faith, then they should know exactly what they are turning their backs on. Where he is monumentally wrong is that people are not turning their backs on the teaching of the Church so much as the Christless way many of these doctrines are applied. People who are quitting the Church after deliberation are doing so because they have found themselves in a Church structure without Christ and it is precisely the kind of authoritarian, institutional Clericalism in which Pell is a key player which drives them out.

Ultimately though, it is Christ who matters, not the structure of the Church that matters. A potentially useful starting point for a new conversation between practicing Catholics and their disillusioned and alienated sisters and brothers is what Jesus had to say about the bed rock of a decent life. When pressed by his opponents for a description of the basic moral rule of life, Jesus appealed to the wisdom of the famous Jewish teacher and scholar, Hillel. In reply to a question about what exactly constituted the central teaching of the Jewish Law, Hillel replied "What you hate for yourself, do not do to another. This is the whole of the Law and the Prophets now go and study it." Any decent person, of any religious or non-religious

background, would probably find this acceptable as a common sense, universally valid, rule of life and worth exploring at greater depth. (Mt 7: 12; 22: 34-40)

Conclusion:

Catholics, young and old, have made their point emphatically that they have become disenchanted with a Church structure that has little or no connection with Jesus Christ to whom they remain attracted nor with the world they inhabit. They are equally forthright too in making it clear that they have lost patience with most of the Church leadership which gives little or no indication that it is willing to talk with them or to learn anything from them. The latest lame gestures at consultation through a Survey Monkey instrument is about as serious as the hierarchy are capable of getting. The sheer arrogance of it all is probably too much for most Catholics to tolerate any longer.

"The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open. One concrete sign of such openness is that our church doors should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door. There are other doors that should not be closed either. Everyone can share in some way in the life of the Church; everyone can be part of the community, nor should the doors of the sacraments be closed for simply any reason. This is especially true of the sacrament which is itself 'the door': baptism. The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak. (51) These convictions have pastoral consequences that we are called to consider with prudence and boldness. Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems." - Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 47.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, his many homilies and addresses, Francis highlights a constant theme of his papacy and that is, God cannot be domesticated and trivialised by descriptions such as law-giver, judge, punisher or rewarder. God is best understood in terms of boundless mercy and compassion which heal and free God's damaged people beyond imagining.

Francis' genius is that he is causing a major correction in the understanding of who God is. He is reminding people that God is diminished, trivialised and domesticated when described primarily in terms of the Law, Judge, reward and punishment. God is best understood as the God of limitless mercy and compassion. Francis is also creating a moral level playing field in the Church by reminding everyone, hierarchy and not, that almost without exception, Catholic families have members who are divorced, remarried without annulment, cohabitation, homosexuals. Once that common ground is acknowledged then the whole perspective shifts away from law and order, moral disorder and Canonical irregularity to the Mystery of God's grace and mercy. Their power to bring about real, lasting healing and resolution even in the most intractable of situations are limitless.

Drew Chistiansen sums it up well:

“In the hiatus between the two sessions of the Synod of Bishops on the Family, one way to begin is to demonstrate the people’s desire for dialogue with bishops on the pastoral care of families. In particular, they need to voice their desire for attention to the unexplored afflictions suffered by families outside the narrow but much ballyhooed circle of divorce, remarriage and same-sex marriage. These pastoral concerns include the growth of singleness among adult Catholics, single parenthood, the delay of marriage due to poverty, the emergence of combined households, violence and abuse of children and women, care for the divorced and for children of divorce, the multigenerational family and care of the infirm elderly, the impact of inequality on family strength and the spiritual growth of couples and families. When bishops and the synod attend to these issues, then we will know today’s church is advancing along the path to becoming a pastoral church.” (8)

Endnotes:

- 1) Mark Woods, “Why thousands of Catholics are defecting to Protestant Churches,” *Church*, 13 November, 2014 (Linked [here](#)), See also, “South American Catholics Turning Protestant,” *The American Interest*. November 13, 2014 (Linked [here](#)):

“Latin America remains home to an estimated 40 percent of the planet’s Catholic population. But the survey finds that 19 percent of Latin Americans now describe themselves as Protestants. And Protestant churches in Latin America are filled with former Catholics — in Colombia, 84 percent of Protestants say they were baptized as Catholics.

Latin Americans who converted from Catholicism to Protestantism most often said they did so because they were seeking a more personal connection with God.”

- 2) “But the main reason for Catholicism’s decline is the rise of other Christian brands. Protestantism claims 22% of Brazilian hearts, up from 5% in 1970 (most of that increase can be attributed to miracle-working Pentecostal churches). Part of the success is due to clever marketing: Central America’s feel-good evangelical mega-churches have growing television audiences as well as packed weekly congregations. They have been successful fishers of men in the countryside, where state services are scarce and evangelical charitable work is lapped up. During school holidays Central America teems with do-gooding *yanqui* Christian youths, flown in for a fortnight of latrine-digging. Many evangelicals also take a more forgiving line on social matters, where ever more Latin Americans are ignoring the teachings of the Catholic church.”
- 3) *The Economist* editorial, “Why is Latin America cooling on Catholicism?” *The Economist*, July 22, 2013 suggests the Calvinist prosperity Gospel is principal factor at work in the massive defection. (Linked [here](#)),

Marty E. Marty agrees:

“Still in a culture where religions are perceived as matters of choice, the *Economist* assesses that Pentecostalism offers many Catholics more immediacy, a sense of a direct and energizing contact with God. The article also comments on Catholic parishes where Latinos do thrive, because the Catholic church provides a link to “home,” be it in rites and practices of Guatemala or Brazil or elsewhere.”

Martin E. Marty, “Catholic Hispanics defect,” *The Martin E. Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion*, March 23, 2015. (Linked [here](#))

Thomas Baker, “Why young people are leaving the Church in such numbers,” *Global Pulse*, October 10, 2014. (Link [here](#)) “More disturbingly, their vague priorities of “being a better person” don’t seem likely to generate much of a desire for deeper answers to life’s questions, at least in the short run. “It’s just easier not to follow a religion, is what it comes down to,” says a typical young adult—and even though I feel that way some of the time myself, it’s hard not to agree with the authors’ sense that this is a generation largely lost to what we oldsters think of as Catholic identity.

- 4) Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Secularism grows as more US Christians turn ‘churchless,” *NCR*, Oct. 24, 2014. (Link [here](#)); William J. Byron, Charles Zech, “Why They Left,” *America Magazine*, April 30, 2012 (Linked [here](#)) See also: Grant Tobin, “7.5 million Americans lost their religion since 2012,” *NCR*, March 12, 2015. (Linked [here](#)) Dan Merica, “7 Reasons why Catholics are leaving the Church,” *CNN Belief Blog*, March 30, 2012 (Linked [here](#)), Mary Ann Walsh, “Why go to Mass?” *America*, April 13, 2015. (Linked [here](#))

- 5) “Hispanics leaving Catholicism have tended to move in two directions. Some have become born-again or evangelical Protestants, a group that exhibits very high levels of religious commitment. On average, Hispanic evangelicals – many of whom also identify as either Pentecostal or charismatic Protestants – not only report higher rates of church attendance than Hispanic Catholics but also tend to be more engaged in other religious activities, including Scripture reading, Bible study groups and sharing their faith.

At the same time, other Hispanics have become religiously unaffiliated – that is, they describe themselves as having no particular religion or say they are atheist or agnostic. This group exhibits much lower levels of religious observance and involvement than Hispanic Catholics. In this respect, unaffiliated Hispanics roughly resemble the religiously unaffiliated segment of the general public.

Hispanic Catholics are somewhere in the middle. They fall in between evangelicals and the unaffiliated in terms of church attendance, frequency of prayer and the degree of importance they assign to religion in their lives, closely resembling white (non-Hispanic) Catholics in their moderate levels of religious observance and engagement (see [Chapter 3](#).)” Pew Research Center. Religion and Public Life, “The shifting religious identity of Latinos in the United States. Nearly one in four Latinos are former Catholics,” May 7, 2014 (Linked [here](#))

- 6) Michelle Dunne Breen, “Losing my religion,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 24, 2010. (Linked [here](#)).
- 7) Cindy Wooden, “Pope Francis is helping Church reach world’s ‘seekers’ speakers say.” *NCR* March 6, 2015, (Linked [here](#)) Pope Francis urges dialogue with unbelievers, [here](#) and [here](#). “Pope at Mass: Culture of encounter is the foundation of peace.” *Vatican Radio*, 22/05/13 (Linked [here](#)) And,

Shortly after the death of the great German theologian Karl Rahner SJ (1904-1984), a key advisor at Vatican II, as well as professor and prolific author, Thomas Sheehan wrote of the profound influence Martin Heidegger had on Rahner. In a 1935 lecture Heidegger said, in favour of the value of questioning, "On the other hand, if such faith does not continually expose itself to the possibility of unfaith, it is not faith but a convenience." It is no wonder then that Rahner entitled a whole series of his books "Theological Investigations." David Timbs, "What Christians share with atheists," *Cathnews*, April 6, 2010. (Linked [here](#))

8) "Changing Hearts," *America Magazine*, May 4, 2015. (Linked [here](#))

Some items for further thought:

- Simon Bullivant, "Put the New Evangelization on Hold," in the *Catholic Herald*, 19 February 2015 writes the uselessness of the New Evangelization unless the issue of the mass exit from the Church is seriously addressed (Linked [here](#))

Bullivant: "Lapsation and disaffiliation, the very hallmarks of our new mission fields, are a case in point. Everyone agreed with Pope Francis when he said, in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, that "it is undeniable that many people feel disillusioned and no longer identify with the Catholic tradition". But how many are there and who are they? Without accurate answers to these questions, we can have no realistic hope of actually lessening, still less reversing, this urgent pastoral problem."

- It is now recognised that Pope John Paul II's New Evangelization was directed at pre- WW II economic boom had lost its patrimonial faith and Christian culture. While the erosion of faith practice and Catholic identity may reasonably be, at least partially, attributed to the external effects of forces such as secularisation, internal factors are more than equally important in explaining the massive decline in participation. They are not dissimilar to those described in the first and second of this *Catholics for Renewal* Newsletter series. (Part I [here](#); Part II [here](#))
- The German Catholic scene in particular has been under the public microscope in recent years as hundred of thousand of Catholics have tended their public resignation from the Church which has theoretical and practical consequences. It is a form of auto excommunication which not only cuts them off from the Church's ministries but it also cuts the Church off from more of the state Church tax, *Kirchensteuer*, which amounts to around 9% of personal income tax. (See [here](#) and [here](#))



The Exit sign on German religious Autobarns.

- Large numbers of Spaniards now identify themselves as atheists: Julie Day, “Spain, Fifth Country in the World with Most Atheists,” *On the Pulse of Spain*, April 15, 2015 (Linked [here](#))

“Not really surprising at all. In the 1930s Spain had a bloody and savage civil war followed by a right wing Catholic religious dictatorship that only ended in the 1970s. Thousands of ordinary folk died or 'disappeared'. And the Church canonised some of the dead but only from the right wing. The savagery in the civil war was often against the Church because it was still a feudal society in which the Church often looked like and was an oppressor. The dictator, Francisco Franco was a savage, an admirer of Hitler, supported by the Church. He granted the Church exemption from tax and all state interference, it could censor anything it chose and Catholicism was conflated with Spanish identity. As Tony Judt points out the history books studied in Spanish schools began with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and came right up to Franco, the Generalissimo. In Spain a certain kind of literalist, devotional Catholicism was imposed as an ideology that people resisted at grave risk. No wonder many of them are atheists though I hope they are thinking atheists. It would be a pity if it were just a reaction formation.”
An insightful comment by “Enda” in *Catholica Forum*, Tuesday, April 28, 2015.

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