

## Why do Young People Leave the Faith?

I think that there are a few fundamental reasons why some people, including adolescents and young adults, exposed to the Catholic faith walk away from it. They are the same reasons that some remain in the faith but never embrace it.

*If a person is not convinced that the faith is true he does not accept it. If a person is not convinced that the faith is important he does not consider it. If a person is not convinced that his faith will make him happy he will not sacrifice for it.*

---

*If a person is not convinced that the faith is true he does not accept it.*

In order for a person, whether adult or adolescent, to believe the Catholic faith he must have an adequate knowledge of the important tenets of the faith as well as an understanding of why they must be true.

Is it enough to just teach our children the facts and the reasons behind them? Not always. We cannot know for sure

Why do so many, particularly young people, doubt that the Catholic faith is true?

- The tenets of the faith were not clearly presented to the individual.
- People who do not know the Catholic faith teach it to others. Typically, there are no tests for knowledge or faithfulness before someone can serve as a catechist.
- There is insufficient explanation provided to Catholics of why the Catholic worldview must be correct and differing worldviews must be wrong.
- Bishops and clergy and laity freely express disagreement with Catholic teachings. These disagreements are rarely challenged.
- Apologetic arguments are not offered in defense of controversial Catholic teachings.
- Other religions and denominations are respected. Whereas people sincerely holding opposing views should be respected, errors are not worthy of respect. However, differing opinions should be respected. If disagreements on matters of faith are treated as just differing opinions then the Catholic faith becomes “an opinion.”
- They have never been asked to propose or defend their faith to others.

*If a person is not convinced that the faith is important he does not consider it.*

People believe many things are true while taking them for granted. In order for someone to see the faith as important the tenets of the faith have to engage him. A person can be engaged if he is shown the beauty of a teaching or if he recognizes that a teaching answers a question important to him. On a simpler level people recognize that something is important if others in their circles act like it is important and if they are expected to act accordingly. If everyone cheers and applauds when an individual walks on stage we suspect he is important. If everyone is chatting in a conference room and the talking stops and attention

turns to a particular person when he enters the room even those “not in the know” recognize that a big shot has arrived.

How does someone come to see that the Catholic faith is important? Reverence is key.

“Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi”--as we worship, so we believe, so we live.

This saying points to the reality that if we worship with reverence we will more likely consider what we worship with reverence. In *Confessions* St. Augustine said that every sin brings about its own punishment and that the punishment of irreverence is blindness. Blindness, not necessarily because a person will not see (or hear) the truths when they are presented, but more so that he will not bother to consider them. Parents who behave reverently toward God and demand their children do so at least tell their children that God (and by extension their Catholic faith) is important to them. (Similarly, if Dad becomes angry whenever the children treat Mom with disrespect the children are more likely to see Mom as worthy of respect.) If we want the faithful to see the importance of the faith our leaders must treat the sacraments and the truths of the faith with reverence.

Another important factor is that other people—family, friends, etc.—are interested in their faith. They discuss it; they study it; they share it.

Why do so many, particularly young people doubt that the Catholic faith is important?

- On a personal level, many people, including young people, are dealing with challenging problems in their lives. Unless these problems drive them to God, they tend to take their focus away from God. They do not have the time or energy *to make something else* important.
- There is no real expectation that parents teach their children the faith. If parents do not teach their Catholic faith to their children they are saying it is less important than the things they do teach their children. The church gives lip service when it says that religious education classes supplement education in the home. If they *really* did there would be a dialogue with the parents about what that supplement was offering and not offering, basically, how it was meant to integrate with what is being taught in the home.
- The most important encounter with the Catholic faith is in the Holy Mass. When the importance of the Holy Mass is diminished, the faith is diminished. The importance of the Holy Mass is diminished by
  - Music that does not promote reverence
  - Homilies that do not take the faith seriously
  - Behaviors by clergy and other laity that show irreverence
- People are discouraged from evangelization. If the Catholic faith was important Catholics would be expected to share it. When we tell people that their obligation to evangelize is satisfied by simply living a holy life so that others will be drawn to the faith we are discouraging them from challenging others with a presentation of the Gospel.
- Catholics are taught that everyone goes to heaven or that you have to choose to go to hell to go there or that God loves everyone unconditionally...so why bother learning the faith. None of these modern teachings are actually held by the Church, but many do not know that.
- As children get older the value of their parents views can diminish relative to those of their peers or their role models. If impressionable young people (or even older adults) associate

too much with others who do not see their Catholic faith as important it ceases to be so to them.

- Sometimes the decision whether to consider the faith is affected by the presentation of an appealing alternative worldview through video or even literature. A young person enthralled by Harry Potter may find the real world of the Christian faith boring by comparison. He may be drawn into the occult or just into thinking about it. Similarly, a clever science fiction writer can present a worldview (multi-verses, alien philosophies) that is more compelling. If these fictional worldviews capture the young person's imagination he may not bother considering the real world of his Catholic faith.
- Sometimes devout parents treat the faith as a treasure they give to their children instead of a treasure that their children must work for if they are to obtain it.
- If the parents are not working in a substantial way to build up the kingdom of God their example tells the children it is not important.

*If a person is not convinced that his faith will make him happy he will not sacrifice for it.*

We can be happy because we are getting something we want *or* because we are living for a grand purpose. If a person is embracing his faith because he is having fun experiences or because his social life is tied to his church or church group he will only be willing to sacrifice for those fun experiences or to remain associated with his church group. Those people should be expected to jump ship for an experience offering more fun or for a better social group. These people can also be more easily lured away by the treasures of the world (wealth, power, or even sex, drugs, and rock and roll). They can also be more easily chased away by the scandal of members of the church.

But a person who sees the Church as the earthly manifestation of Our Lord's kingdom on earth and himself as a valiant soldier in His Lord's army and a witness of Christ to this fallen world and sets his personal value on how well he fulfills those noble callings will fight temptation and make sacrifices. He will be happier because his life has an important purpose.

People have to be willing to sacrifice something in order to follow Christ. It may mean giving up illicit sex or artificial birth control or pornography. It may mean less self-indulgence and setting aside time for prayer. It may mean working against evils like abortion or spending time in corporal or spiritual works of mercy. It may mean donating money to charitable works. It does require the faithful to see that we are in a spiritual battle for souls and the world and to admire those who have died for the faith to be held in high esteem. Many earthly soldiers would rather die for their country than fail to protect those they love.

Why do so many, particularly young people doubt that the Catholic faith will bring them true happiness?

- Sometimes, too many times, young people suffer loss, perhaps at a time that they felt they were being faithful to God. It could be something like divorce of the parents, or a death in the family, or abuse of some kind. It could be less serious than those burdens, but still very hard—anxiety, struggles in school, social difficulties, or unrequited love. If the young person facing these burdens gets no solace or solution from God and the Church he *learns* that God

or the Church is not really there for him. What good is a friend who doesn't help you when you are suffering?

- Many people leave the faith because they have become romantically involved with someone of another faith or someone of no faith. When that relationship is jeopardized by the Catholic faith the person's commitment to his faith is tested. Frequently, the person leaving his faith will justify it with other reasons that may sound genuine, but are not.
- In a wealthy society the populace learns that happiness comes from pleasure and possessions or perhaps fame, accomplishment, or power. If parents and the Church do not overcome this teaching as a child grows into adulthood the young adult will find it very hard to accept the Christian worldview of knowing, loving, and serving God in this life in order to be happy with Him in the next. Sadly, many young people turn to illicit pleasures, such as sex, drugs, or pornography, before they are ready to make serious intellectual decisions about what will make them happy. They can then be so addicted to these pleasures that giving them up requires such a strong act of the will that they so not even want to consider it. (They can also turn to less illicit pleasures, such as gaming or media, that while not necessarily taking them away from God they can present a serious distraction.
- So many of our heroes in media or sports are not Christian heroes. These heroes can be deceptive, unchaste, violent, merciless, irreligious, indulgent, and damaged.
- Our pop culture reminds us that it is always better to laugh with the sinners instead of crying with the saints.
- Church leaders as well as lay Catholics don't model lives that find happiness in the will of God.
- The Church does not ask us to live sacrificially for God. Young people are frequently cajoled to stay in church by offering them a "big time."

What is the solution?

The solution is simple, but not easy. Those interested in the new evangelization need to develop strategies that address the concerns of belief, importance, and happiness. Existing strategies should be compared to these three factors to see where they may be lacking. Likewise, concerned Catholic parents should examine their children, their environment, and their strategies in light of these factors and make adjustments accordingly. Such examination by parents can best succeed if spouses engage in vigorous dialogue with each other.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> As husband and wife who have become "one flesh" through the bond of marriage, they share the duty to educate their children through willing collaboration nourished by vigorous mutual dialogue that "has a new specific source in the sacrament of marriage, which consecrates them for the strictly Christian education of their children: that is to say, it calls upon them to share in the very authority and love of God the Father and Christ the shepherd, and in the motherly love of the Church, and it enriches them with wisdom, counsel, fortitude and all the other gifts of the Holy Spirit in order to help the children in their growth as human beings and as Christians". (*THE TRUTH AND MEANING OF HUMAN SEXUALITY - Guidelines for Education within the Family*, section 37, the Pontifical Council for the Family, December 8, 1995.)