

By Frank P. DeSiano, C.S.P.

Bringing Inactive Catholics Back

Get people to tell their stories

Many priests, in my observation, seem to be of two minds when it comes to some of the aspects of evangelization. On the one hand, many priests will roll their eyes and tell me how many parishioners they already have; why would they ever want more? On the other hand, priests will wring their hands over statistics about the growing number of Catholics who are not present at Mass, while twisting their lips so as to say, "What can we do about this?"

Behind the hand wringing, eye rolling and lip twisting lies a very human reality: priestly numbers are on the decrease, responsibilities are on the increase, and we feel faced with factors that cannot easily be understood or explained. We see the graying of our congregations, as Catholics raised before the Second Vatican Council continue to worship regularly, but in diminishing numbers -- for the simple reason that this group is now retired, aging and dying.

We also see those raised during the Vatican Council who worship with some regularity, but hardly with the consistency of earlier generations. And when it comes to those raised after the Second Vatican Council, priests simply have a hard time knowing what to think.

Surely clergy have a reason to feel overwhelmed. Most of us are older, often working beyond an age when we presumed we would be retired. If we have any youth or vigor, we probably have been "invited" to assume more pastoral responsibility; parochial vicars are taken away from us -- and clustered parishes mean we often have to take care of two parish plants.

We Catholic priests, however, do not have the luxury of using our being overwhelmed to keep from facing our major pastoral situation today: the reality that Catholic life in the future will be far different than in the past, and that attendance at Mass will become only more erratic in the future.

Getting perspective on this pastoral situation can help us priests think about pastoral tools to deal with it. Tempted as we might be to think that the future Church has to shrink, we might, instead, find some strategies that touch peoples' lives even in the blur of our modern world.

A New Paradigm

I believe we now have a "new paradigm" of inactive Catholic. I can best present this new paradigm by describing the older paradigm we have had about inactive Catholics. Inactive

Catholics are formally described as those who have not attended Church, apart from social reasons, at least once in the past six months.

There are, to be sure, various issues we might have with this rather behavioral definition, but it is the one used by those who study religious practice. Given the relatively large number of Catholics who practiced their faith in the 1940s and 1950s (nearly 80 percent, at least according to the norm of weekly Mass attendance), we could easily construct the image of an inactive Catholic as one of people who have "fallen away" from this regular practice of their faith. In our language and thought patterns, we can easily think the world is divided into "active" Catholics and "inactive" Catholics.

'Fallen Away' Catholic

This older paradigm uses images of the "lapsed" Catholic, or "fallen away" Catholic, with the associated pastoral strategy of inviting Catholics "back" to the faith, inviting Catholics to come "home." In fact, it is hard for us not to fall into some kind of vocabulary like this, particularly those of us who would periodically attempt to reach inactive Catholics by a "homecoming" Sunday or some program to welcome Catholics "back."

Things, however, have changed, as any of us who have been observing Church in the past 30 years can easily affirm. In the older paradigm, Catholics had a clear identity with the Church; their subsequent inactivity violated that identity.

But in the newer paradigm, we acknowledge younger generations who have a relatively weak identity with the Church; because of this, there is no clear pattern for them to violate or betray. "Relatively weak identity" means that people may well describe themselves as Catholic, indicate they are Catholic upon entrance to a hospital or college, but feel little need to attend Mass each week.

To see how this weakening identity looks, we can consult *American Catholics Today, New Realities of their Faith and their Church*, by William D'Antonio and his associates (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

On p. 40, Catholic responses to certain questions are reported in this vein: in 1987, 49 percent of Catholics said their faith was important to them; in 2005, the percentage was down to 44. Likewise, in 1987, 64 percent of Catholics would indicate strongly that they would never leave the Church; now only 56 percent respond that way. If, in 1987, 44 percent of Catholics claimed to attend Mass weekly, that number was now down to a weaker 34 percent in 2005.

We priests do not need to read these numbers; we only need to read what is happening in our congregations week by week as fewer in the younger generations make themselves present.

At Mass 'Episodically'

In the last parish where I served, in the South Loop of Chicago, I would see folks belonging to these younger generations of Catholics register in church, bring their children, and even enjoy their experience of church. But if they were absent for a few or many weeks, well that was just part of their undoubtedly busy, professional lives. They attended Mass "episodically."

Campus ministers in my Paulist Community will likewise report how young people on campuses will think nothing of attending a Baptist Bible study, yoga meditation, and Sunday evening Mass all on the same day. All of this signals what "weaker identity" looks like.

While we might berate modern catechetical practices or post-Vatican II liturgical practices, or some other factor of modernity, as the culprit and cause for this, the reality is surely this: models of growing up have changed, social patterns have changed, how identity happens has changed. As a result, short of becoming like Amish, we, and the rest of mainline religion, have to deal with new, and more tentative, patterns of appropriating religion.

Gone are the days when people were Catholic because their families or heritage was Catholic. Now have come the days when people do not receive their identities from the world beyond them (family, culture, education, etc.), but rather formulate their identities from a whole variety of experiences. Younger generations identify with almost every aspect of their lives weakly, tentatively, gradually. Religion is only one more aspect in their lives where this is true.

New Methods

As a result of this phenomenon, we clergy have a very complicated situation which will not yield easily to some of our more traditional tools. We cannot "educate" young people into an identity, because the nature of education itself is tentative and exploratory. Nor can we "command" people into an identity or behavior, because this assumes a set of relationships which barely exists anymore.

The only sisters we see commanding children "the good old way" are depicted on stage on Broadway where aging Catholics laugh at how things used to be. Nor do we have large hoards of people with whom to work, figuring that 75 percent of them will stick while the rest drift away; Catholics do not cluster together in large, definable groups, unless they are part of newer immigrant groups like Latinos or Vietnamese.

Nor do we have innate cultural behaviors working in our favor; we no longer assume that, if we open up the Church door, people will inevitably show up. We no longer have the tight Catholic social universe to enforce behavior.

What tools, then, do we have to deal with this new situation, this new paradigm of inactive Catholics?

Tool of Experience

We have to use tools that respond to the criterion that most people, de facto, use for religion today (whether we like it or not) -- experience. What people see, feel and get involved with constitutes the criterion of faith today. Faith (as modern Americans construe it) is not some objective reality into which they feel they should fit; rather, faith is the way people choose to assemble their ideals, in accord with the force or thrust of those ideals.

Again, we may wish this was not so, but it is. Just look at the proliferation of so-called "non denominational" churches -- they are a Rorschach for the multiple kinds of expressions of faith we Americans keep inventing for ourselves. The criterion for all of this? Experience. "This is what I (want to) feel or think."

One particular kind of experience that is powerful for people is conversation -- the interchange between people that is unconstrained, open and accepting. Much younger generations surely text their way through life, but life experiences are by and large formed in relationship to peers -- peers who talk to one another, who form each other's experiential base.

Another particular kind of experience is what Americans loosely call "spirituality," which is a broad way of talking about transcendence. Americans are religious on various levels. Most will acknowledge praying daily (over 80 percent); interest in things religious (evidenced by the ever-present battles around evolution) remains high; and Americans attend worship at a rate that exceeds most other modern, Western societies.

Yet Americans are deeply suspicious of institutions which they see as existing more for their institutional expanse than for the care of individuals.

These factors call for a methodology that uses open conversation, in a friendly and spiritual setting, to help people reinforce their identity with Christ and the Church. It calls for patience with where "people are at," and it requires willingness to let people piece together components of a renewed Catholic identity and spirituality. It calls for utilizing the bonding powers of small groups to help Catholics feel part of their larger group -- their parish and their Church.

Awakening Faith

The Paulist Fathers have developed a new pastoral program to utilize these methods for outreach to this new paradigm of inactive Catholics. The Paulist National Catholic Evangelization Association (PNCEA) has produced Awakening Faith: Reconnecting to Your Catholic Faith as a new approach to supplement other pastoral programs.

It is a set of conversations around short, accessible essays, touching on the basics of faith (six conversations) or the application of faith to today's life (four optional, supplemental conversations). These conversations are nestled in dynamics of welcome, ice-breaking, reflection, sharing and prayer; each session is referenced to the United States Catholic Catechism for Adults.

It uses a conversational approach to general catechetical themes (spirituality, Jesus, the Spirit, mercy, Mass and Church) to generate the kind of bonding (experience) that allows Catholics to renew their connection to the Church.

Awakening Faith presumes there is some residual faith -- it seeks to "awaken" this faith. It does not talk about coming "home" or "back," so much as it talks about reconnecting through experiencing something new. It does not play on guilt or nostalgia (the basis for these hardly exists anymore) so much as it devises methods for inviting people, at key points in their life, to bond with a community of faith.

An overview of Awakening Faith can be found, along with many other resources, at www.awakeningfaith.org. The program was designed to be as self-explanatory and easy to use as possible, requiring only a few parishioners committed to reach out to inactive Catholics.

Outreach to Parents

Cursory awareness of the demographic drivers of today's situation indicates places where we need to extend particular outreach: parents of our children (whether in parochial school or religious education) and young adults. Most pastors admit to me that approximately only half of parents attend church, even though they bring their children to religious education or Catholic school.

Pastors will even begin to see some of the pastoral reasons behind this phenomenon -- single parents, separated parents, overworked parents. Pastors, furthermore, often are unaware of how "old" our parishes look to young adults -- all of our gray hair hardly seems inviting to people in their 20s and 30s. But these groups might well be areas ripe for invitation.

Parents want to participate in what's happening to their children; young adults are moving through transitions that involve commitment and new images of themselves -- transitions where faith can be a special asset.

My experience in Chicago taught me that having a particular theme or topic made it easier for people to share. People would not immediately open up to the invitation to "tell their story" or reveal their hurts. Yet ranges of people will delve into a topic if that is made accessible and if they are given permission to share.

When people are given permission to talk, they surprise themselves with all that comes out of them! A further pastoral conclusion I came to was this: groups eventually correct themselves, eliminating the nuttier ideas and forming a sensible center.

We cannot, of course, know the future; no one in 1965 would have foreseen these last 40 years. It's a pretty good guess, however, that the future will not look like the past. Culture has changed. Social reality is different. Media and the Internet will interplay with life in ways that we can only vaguely surmise.

Into this new pastoral reality, which will define Church experience well into the future, one can only introduce appropriate pastoral tools that deal with the evolving world of modern experience; any tool or strategy will only be one more factor in the swirl of modern life.

At some point a movement to become consistently active in faith may emerge from the sheer spiritual hungers of people. But one cannot be sure. If we have resources, however, we might spur such a surge in re-involvement in the faith.

Awakening Faith is offered as only one tool, adapted to deal with aspects of the new paradigm of inactive Catholics, as a help to priests and pastors who strive to involve modern people in a more consistent practice of their faith. TP

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By Father Patrick M. Carrion

Priests' Mothers: Gifts to Sons and Church

Mother's Day

May is a great month. Typically in my geographical area the trees and bushes are in bloom. Lent is over but life is just as hectic with first Communions, ordinations, etc. For Catholics, May is probably seen first as the Month of Mary, during which is the holiest of feast days -- Mother's Day.

We may forget to go to Mass on the Feast of the Assumption or the Immaculate Conception or on any given Sunday. For these omissions you can be forgiven with a quick confession the next Saturday afternoon. But forget to call or visit Mom on Mother's Day -- I am not sure even God wants to venture to forgive that one -- that forgiveness is left to Mom alone to dole out.

But of all the mothers that are out there, there is one group of mothers who stand distinct. Their role is prominent and unique, but I have never seen published rules of etiquette for them. They hold a place of prominence, but there is no rite of initiation for them to assume the role. Some assume the role without even knowing there is a role. Some fulfill the role not knowing they are doing it. Some fulfill the role so naturally, it is as if they were the one destined for it. The role: The Mother of a Priest.

Father's Mother

All priests have one. Unfortunately, some mothers of priests assume the role posthumously and never had the opportunity to enjoy the role for themselves. Sadly, some sons who become priests never experience the joy of seeing their mother's face as she enjoys the new role she has taken on. I dedicate this article to those mothers who died before enjoying the role and to their sons who celebrated their ordination without them.

The role of the priest's mother is unique. I was fortunate to have my mother at my ordination, though she died the following year. I did, however, experience the joy of seeing my mother enjoy the role of mother of the priest since my brother Michael, (also a priest for the Archdiocese of Baltimore), had been ordained five years prior to my ordination to priesthood. She had a few years of practice by the time I came along.

My mother received her "training in the role" from her mother who had a son who was ordained to the priesthood -- my uncle, Father Martin Flahavan -- also a priest in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. It really strikes me that there is an unspoken role for the mother of the priest when I see and watch my stepmother in the role. (My father remarried after my mother's death). She

assumed the role so naturally and it was great for me that she was there with and for my late father. I had to feel sorry for her at times as she was a non-Catholic thrust into the world of Catholicism by marrying a man with two sons who are priests.

Public Persons

Priests are very public persons, at least in their own pasture, and their public role spills over into the family. When Mom visits (dads too, but moms seem to receive more attention in this role), the front pew may be reserved for that special occasion (installation of the son as pastor; parish's anniversary Mass and other special occasions). You can hear the stage whispers from the congregation as she (the parents) walks down to take a seat in the pew of honor. "Oh that must be Father's mother (and father)"; "Oh, she must be so proud." "Oh, Father looks just like his mother, isn't that nice."

Pretending not to stare, people scan the church, but their eyes slow down when they reach the mother. It is a public role that comes with much recognition: being introduced by her son during Mass, bringing up the gifts, receiving a Kiss of Peace (a real kiss) -- "Father, does not typically kiss," they say, "she must be his mother."

Then there is the reception after the event. The mother (father, too) sits with the son. You can not help but think of the wedding feast of Cana at this point, as no matter that the son may be the guest of honor, the mother still is in charge. The people come over and pay their respects. I am sure 9 out of 10 times it is the same question or statement: "Oh, you must be so proud." Mom gives the same answer to each. "Yes, we are so proud of him."

Second-Class Citizens

Of course, her other children are sitting there rolling their eyes as second class citizens as "the best of all the sons as the 'Joseph'" (the favorite son -- see Gn 37) gets all the recognition.

Sometimes the other siblings are not even acknowledged by the visitor even though they are standing right there, much to the sadness of the mother. Just as was the case in the biblical story -- the siblings are probably ready to throw him into the cistern.

Mothers of priests, on a more serious side, play a special role for their son. Since the son is a celibate, she probably remains the primary feminine influence in her son's life. Her other sons and daughters have left the family home. There is a different kind of relationship with the son who is married whose primary feminine influence and presence is his wife. The mothers (and fathers, too, in this thought) still have a bond to the priest-son. It comes out in very supportive ways.

The most significant way is the way in which the son uses the word "home." I heard so many priests say to their staff as they leave the office early "I am going home for dinner tonight." Many times they mean their mother's house. For the married son, "going home early tonight" means going to the home he has with his wife and children. Parents of priests tend to keep a bedroom available for the son who is a priest for when he visits. Obviously, once a parent always a parent. The priest may never sleep there but it is nice to know that there is a place to call home if your own rectory is not that for you. It is these genuine supportive ways that make the death of the second parent a very significant moment in the life of the priest.

I spoke to a couple of mothers of priests while writing this article. They know that there is something different about them because people treat them differently. If she has several children and names them all along with their career paths to new acquaintance, that person will typically inquire about the priest-son before the teacher-son, lawyer- daughter or the engineer-son. One mother notes, "they will even ask Church questions as if I, the mother, have a degree in theology, never asking me for legal or medical advice because my other children are in those professions." Another mother commented that in her line of work she meets many priests (some dressed civilly) but if it is revealed that she is a mother of a priest, the priests in the group gravitate to her and reveal that they are a priest. It is as if they feel safe revealing who they are because she understands them -- and she probably does.

A mother hears her son's tired voice after a long weekend or she hears that frustrated voice after a difficult encounter. She hears her son because she is the one who has that most unique of relationships with her son. She hears and sees the other side of a priest's life -- keeping all these things in her heart (Lk 2:51).

In the end, it must be said that the humility and patience of mothers (and fathers) of priests along with the sounding board and safe haven they provide for our priests is a gift not only to the sons but to the Church. TP

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