

A MARRIED PRIEST REFLECTS ON CATHOLIC LIFE TODAY

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My parents taught their three sons to go to Mass on Sunday - every Sunday. We went to the parish in which we lived. We went every Sunday. If, for some extraordinary reason, we were to miss Sunday Mass, we dutifully went to the parish rectory to obtain a dispensation from the pastor. It only needed to happen a couple of times. Permission, we were told, was not typically granted so it was rarely sought.

If we wanted to participate at another parish, we had to get permission from the pastor of the parish in which we lived as well as from the pastor of the parish which we wished to attend. Permission was not an easy thing to get.

Today it's a different world. Catholics generally attend the parish of their choice. Some parishes in the community are known as a "destination parish" because they drew people from many miles away because of a particular charism. To be honest, "destination parishes" are generally very conservative or very liberal. Most folks, however, just go to the church that's closest - or the one where their kids go to school.

The Roman church is undergoing some fundamental shifts these days. People are to kneel during the Eucharistic prayer. The priest is to receive communion first. People have been told to bow or genuflect when they come to receive communion. Lay ministers of the Eucharist are no longer to wash the "sacred vessels." And for heavens sake never use the name "Yahweh." Come Advent 2011 there will be more changes to the Liturgy. "And also with your Spirit" will become a familiar refrain. The Profession of Faith is no longer "We believe" but "I

believe." Prayers will be literal translations from the Latin and will make less sense for speakers of common English.

Some like it. Some don't like it. Most, I suppose, just trudge along saying "Whatever."

I suppose I find myself in a small minority that's basically had it. My faith journey planted the seeds of Vatican II deep in my heart and I've pretty well integrated the spirit of the council. The church is all about the People of God. The hierarchy is meant to serve the people.

I am a "journey Catholic" rather than a "kingdom Catholic." I believe that our faith journey can and will take many unique twists and turns and that with each step I am accompanied by a God whose shoulders are pretty damn wide and who has an incredible sense of humor. The Church shouldn't try to control God.

I believe in collaboration and consultation. I believe in praying in contemporary English. I believe in a Eucharist that is food for the journey. Like any meal, it's meant to be shared by all who gather. Jesus never checked credentials. Pastors (and bishops) shouldn't either. Eucharist is a meal that inspires those who gather for it and nourishes those who receive it. Simply put, if Jesus can get into that bread then I think, if Jesus has a problem, Jesus can get out of that bread. The Church shouldn't try to control Jesus.

My world view teaches me that men and women are created equal in all things. Women, like men, can run multinational corporations, hospitals, schools and nonprofits. Women can be spiritual counselors and leaders of faith communities, just like men. I believe that women can be and are just as priestly as men. And I believe that the gift of marriage is not an impediment to dedicated leadership. The Church shouldn't try to control women or men either.

I believe that most answers are grey, not black and white. I believe that none of us has all the answers. When people profess that they have THE answer, I back away. My experience tells me that such folks are trying to convince themselves more than me. We shouldn't try to control others.

I see the institutional Roman church regressing into a pre-Vatican II shell. To remain in the Roman pew will, I believe, destroy my heart and my soul. I do not turn my back on the People of God. To the contrary. I embrace the People of God, my community of worship and my own faith.

That has to happen in a 21st Century way - a God who loves unconditionally and forgives incessantly, a Eucharist that is inclusive and challenging, a presider who reflects the community, and co-journeymen muddling through life with more questions than answers.

"Yahweh, my friend" is with me. I have no doubt about that. And I feel that closeness grow so much stronger when I can pray and share Eucharist away from the mess I experience in the Roman church. As I find life and energy in another liturgical expression within the catholic tradition, I know that I am drawing ever so closer to my God and the People of God. I'm abandoning neither. Rather, I am being true to my God, true to my baptism, true to my heart.

That's faith. That's hope. That's love. And that's church.