

Fallen-away Catholics: Why they fall

By: Joe Tremblay

During the fall semester of 2012, I taught a college course on ecclesiology (i.e. the life of the Church) through the local diocese. In previous ecclesiology courses the main project for students was to visit churches of other faiths. After their visit they were required to write about their experience.



However, being that there is some confusion about what a Catholic is within the Church itself, I decided to assign a project involving an interview with either a “fallen-away Catholic” or a convert to the Catholic Faith. It was my hope that the students would discover firsthand the reasons why people leave the Church or why they converted to the Faith.

One surprising finding is that some of the “falling-away Catholics” who were interviewed took offense at being referred to as “fallen-away.” Although religiously and, in some cases, spiritually inactive, they reasoned that they are Catholic and will always be Catholic. Their religious identity, for them, is similar to one’s ethnic identity. “Once Catholic, always Catholic,” was how they viewed themselves (i.e. kind of like once saved, always saved).

Not so surprising was another finding on those who no longer practiced their faith. When they were growing up, they recounted that their Catholicism was reduced to going to Mass on Sundays. During the week hardly any spiritual activity or talk about Christ existed. Indeed, the culture at home was a secular one. And whatever influences the Church was able to exert on their souls during that one hour at Mass, certainly could not compete with the secular influences that had mounted during the week. In the end, the latter prevailed over the former. They chose secularism over Catholicism.

More often than not, when Catholicism was a matter of family inheritance and nothing more or when their faith was reduced to a once a week ritual and nothing more -Christ was a negligible factor in their lives. Many of them grew up to be indifferent towards the Catholic religion. And when indifference sets in for anyone, it is very difficult to cure. In fact, trying to convert someone who hates the Catholic Church is easier than one who is apathetic about their own salvation. Both are difficult, true enough. But the latter is more formidable.

For many fallen-away Catholics, the cause of their falling away from the Faith is easy enough to identify: Being Catholic, for them, was just a ritual. It was something they did **once a week**. Worse yet, it wasn’t a life to be lived! Historian Christopher Dawson once said that the reason why we have totalitarian states is because Christians are not totalitarian enough. When the living of one’s faith is not 24/7 and does not involve every aspect of life, then other ideologies, such as secularism, will fill that void.

We may not think of it this way but Catholicism is totalitarian in nature. It is meant to be a life defining force. However, when it becomes compartmentalized, that is, only affecting certain aspects of our lives, it loses its attractiveness and rationale. Even the participation in the Sacred Liturgy on Sunday's presupposes a personal relationship with Christ; one that is nurtured by an active prayer life during the week. If we are not encountering Christ on a day to day basis, then the grace will not be there to live out his moral law nor will the sacrifices that it requires make any sense to us. As Tertullian, a Father of the Church, once said, "Christians are made, not born." But the problem with many nominal Catholics was that they bought into the notion that Catholics are born, not made. I'm afraid that many of us who work on behalf of the Church have fallen short in setting the record straight. And what we had ended up with in recent years are innumerable Catholics who do not know Christ on an a personal level.

Another cause of the falling away process is that many of us were taught that the Catholic Church is no more special than other Christian denominations or even other religions. Yet, a careful study of Church history will demonstrate that when the Catholic Faith was presented as the exclusively and singularly privileged as being the bearer of God's Revelation, the Church enjoyed receiving more converts. During the second century, for instance, the *Gloria* was incorporated into the Mass. This was during the time when it was a political and social necessity to respect all of the honored gods in the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, the early Christians publically voiced their praise to Jesus Christ with the following words: "For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord, you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father." This smacked of religious impoliteness at the time. But as a nineteenth century priest, Fr. Thomas Jenkins, once said, "Our faith ought to be just as exclusive as our charity is universal." A faith that is exclusively and singularly privileged not only attracts converts to the Church, but it inspires a greater love and appreciation for the Faith of the Church. Many martyrs are made from this kind of faith.

On the other hand, when Catholicism is seen as one religion or denomination among many, then religious indifference sets in. Pope Leo XIII had something very insightful to say about this. He said, "To hold that there is no difference in matters of religion between forms that are unlike each other, and even contrary to each other, most clearly leads in the end to the rejection of all religion in both theory and practice." If all religions are equal, then they are equally unimportant. And this is exactly what kind of view has prevailed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Okay, you might ask: "Now that I know what might have caused my children to fall away from the Catholic Faith, and now that they are grown up and are no longer under my roof...now what?" Good question!

For part two, read the second attachment: *Fallen-away Catholics: When it's your son or daughter*