

Imprimatur

A Publication of St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church



What's Up?

Sundays - Adult Faith Formation, 5pm, in Church and Parish Hall:

No AFF 3/30, replaced by Divine Mercy celebration at 3pm; 4/6 Total Consecration to Mary According to St. Louis de Montfort with Drew Swanson; 4/13 Preparations for the Upcoming Year of St. Paul: His Life and Thought; 4/20 Parish Pastoral Plan Update: Trends, Plans and Open Forum. AFF meetings end for the year on April 27th and will resume in the Fall.

Wed/Thurs - Living Your Catholic Faith, 7:30pm (Th) and 9:15am (Wed).

April 2nd-3rd through April 30th-May 1st there will be a five part series titled *Claims Every Catholic Should be Able To Answer* with Justin Nickelsen. Among other issues, week one will answer the following: "There is no such thing as absolute truth. What's true for you may not be true for me."

About

Imprimatur is Written and Edited by Justin Nickelsen, Assistant for Religious Education, and serves as a medium for Catholic education and opinion

Leaving the Church Beyond Doctrine Catholics Need Fellowship Too

The Pew Forum recently released a report titled "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008" (www.pewforum.org) showing that the Catholic population in America has held steady at about 24-25% for the past few decades. The problem is that it has held steady—i.e., Catholicism is a faith based upon the foundation of evangelization and it hasn't grown in the United States for decades. Behind the steady percentage is a massive falling away of Catholics and now 1 in 10 Americans identify themselves as "formerly Catholic"—an alarming statistic. "Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses as a result of affiliation changes", the study noted. "While nearly one-in-three Americans (31%) were raised in the Catholic faith, today fewer than one-in-four describe themselves as Catholic. These losses would have been even more pronounced were it not for the offsetting impact of immigration."

Why? Why have so many people left the Catholic Church? Why has American Catholicism not significantly grown in the last few decades?

Mass Exodus

Many disagree with the Church's teaching on sexual ethics, especially concerning the Church's absolute ban on artificial contraception and abortion. Others have divorced and felt alienated from the Church. Some leave for more doctrinal reasons, claiming that teachings concerning Mary, the pope, the all-male priesthood, purgatory, saints, etc. are not

in accord with the Bible. Still others have left because of various scandals in the Church.

Like it or not, experience consistently shows that people want to feel "welcomed" into their faith communities and want to feel that they are "part" of something. Leaving aside the issues mentioned above, the lack of fellowship within American Catholicism has contributed greatly to the steady exodus: Catholics converting to Protestant denominations because these "vibrant communities" are "welcoming them" and they feel like they are "part of the community".

Again, I said "like it or not".

Picture Perfect

In a perfect world people would make decisions for or against Catholicism for reasons that they have thought through logically; reasons grounded in truth in contrast with those grounded in emotion. I am Catholic, certainly not because I feel particularly welcomed at St. Thomas—I can honestly say that I have been more "welcomed" at the numerous Protestant communities I have been to, as sad as that may be.

"I can honestly say that I have been more welcomed at the Protestant communities I have been to..."

I am specifically Catholic because I feel convinced from Biblical, historical, philosophical and theological grounds that the claims of the Church are true: that She is the foundation of truth (cf. 1 Timothy 3:15); that Christ established this Church and promised to be with

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Holy Quotes

"We are all frail; consider none more frail than yourself"
Thomas A. Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (1:2)

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Her forever (cf. Matthew 16:18-19, 18:17-18, 28:20); that She alone can be traced through apostolic succession back to the Apostles themselves, etc. If I fundamentally disagreed with any of the Church's teachings I would consider the foundation to be compromised and I would most certainly join in the exodus! Period. It is my hope that people become Catholic or leave Catholicism for actual "reasons".

Reality Check

That said, reality is very different. Experience shows that many people leave Catholicism for social/community/fellowship based concerns: they feel more welcomed at New Heights or Crossroads Community Church than St. Thomas and they feel like they are a "part" of such communities.

Mentally distancing myself from the ideal (that is, that all Catholics would be *knowledge* based with their decisions as to what religion to belong to and what church to belong to, if any), I can quickly see that there *is* something to the feeling of disconnect among many present and former Catholics: we do a poor job (as Catholics in general, and as a community here at St. Thomas) of welcoming new people, of creating the environment in which fellowship can develop, of cultivating the growth of our community, of staying connected with newly baptized and confirmed Catholics, etc. This statement throws no single person "under the bus"; it is a sweeping proclamation that applies to our Catholic Faith as it is collectively lived out, and it thereby applies to each and every one of us as baptized Catholics who have the sacramental responsibility to be instruments of grace to people within and outside our Church (cf. *Catechism* [CCC] 1268-1270 and 897-913) using both action *and* word (cf. CCC 905).

In the midst of coming to grasp the importance of the issue of fellowship within Christianity myself, I have had many conversations with Catholics who scoff at what would seem to be an overemphasis on socialization. Instead, many have said we need to

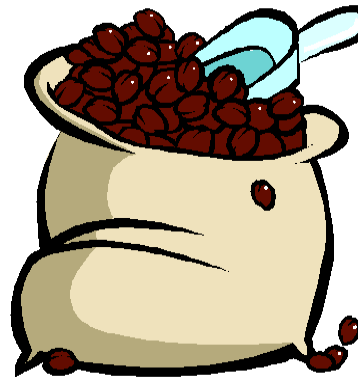
emphasize doctrinal correctness, Liturgical obedience, docility to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, etc. To be sure, these are *extremely* important and urgent matters. Yet Scripture shows no tension between doctrinal certitude and faithfulness to Liturgical rubrics on the one hand, and fellowship on the other. Indeed, the actions of the apostolic community are plain to see: "And they held steadfastly to the apostles' teaching and fellowship [or "communal life", NAB], to the breaking of bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Of course this is only a summary of the Christian life, but *do* note that of the few things the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to mention, "fellowship" was one of them! As the *Catechism* teaches consistently, we are communal beings by nature and this is only accentuated and brought to fulfillment when we are joined together in Faith as the People of God, having been graced by the Divine Life of the Trinity in baptism.

Responding to the Need

How we respond to the need for community and social engagement among Parishioners is a different issue and the answers are many. On January 12th of this year some leaders in the Parish met to discuss how we could reach out as a faith community to 1) people within the Parish, 2) lapse Catholics, and 3) non-Catholics. The meeting continued at the end of the same month. Ideas were tossed about; initial decisions regarding implementation were made. It would be too laborious to offer you even a partial summary of all that was discussed and determined, but one of the common themes throughout these talks was the issue of "fellowship" or the "social welfare" of the Parish Community: how can we respond to the legitimate need of Catholics for fellowship, community, participation, etc?

New Coffee Hour

This weekend we will see what will hopefully prove to be the beginning of change in our Parish: new *healthy*



food and *good* coffee after Sunday Mass. We may or may not come together as a community for fellowship on other days of the week, though you certainly are encouraged to. But we are all at Church on Sun-

days (or should be), thus it is a prime opportunity to accent the communal aspect of our Catholic Faith; it is an occasion to build a bridge to other important areas of individual and communitarian formation: prayer, Scripture, theology, liturgy, etc.

I remember a time when many people came together for fellowship after Mass—the hall would be full. With the many other children, I would play on the stage while our families conversed over coffee and doughnuts. Times have changed. As I see it, few people come downstairs for fellowship after Mass when compared to the 80's and early 90's. People are now especially quick to take off—sometimes before Mass has even ended!—and (at best) devote the rest of their day to their immediate family and Sabbath rest, neglecting a needed balance with the Family of God.

With new food and coffee, better reflecting the various tastes of everyone within the Parish, we have the opportunity to cultivate fellowship, to reach out to those who may be lonely and looking for a kind smile or good conversation, and to connect as a community and learn from those around us.

The Parish welcomes and encourages you to come downstairs after Mass and give the new Coffee Hour a try. Let Fr. Lappe know what you think!