

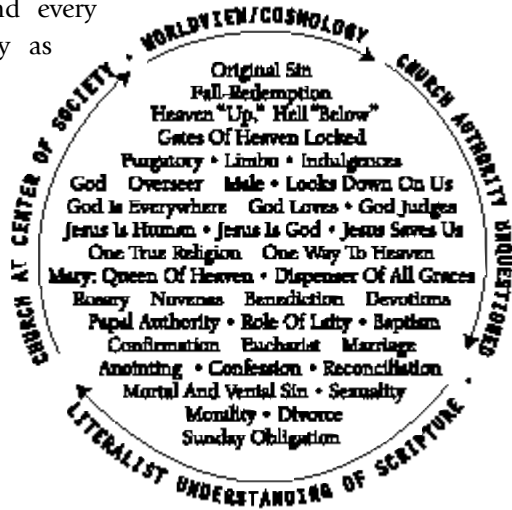
Introduction

We are living through what may well be the greatest time of change in Christian history. In the Catholic Church there has been an extraordinary breakdown of the religious culture which shaped Catholic identity for many adults. There is unprecedented division of opinion among us, as well as unprecedented disagreement with and questioning of church authority on matters concerning faith and morals. At the same time, we are conscious of the spirit of Pentecost moving among us, and we are aware of the challenge to be the church in a new millennium. It is an exciting time, yet it is also a time of tension. It is a time when inevitably many will look back and long for the security of the past. It is a time of uncertainty, but also a time of great potential.

The upheaval and change we have experienced and will continue to experience as Catholics are not simply the result of movements or events within the church. External influences have contributed to the present situation in no small way, and it is vitally important to recognize this. Failure to do so can cause people to look for easy solutions to the tensions and disagreements created by the breakdown of

previously uniform Catholic practice. It can lead to blaming particular groups within the church for the church's present problems. It can cause some Catholics to put their hopes in a "restorationist" policy to solve the problems, i.e., wanting to move back to the days of strong order and authority, of unquestioning obedience, and more visible signs of Catholic identity, such as the return to confession or forms of devotional practice. It can blind us to the urgent need to come to terms with the great social and scientific developments of our age. The reality is that if the Christian message is to be relevant to people educated within a social and scientific worldview simply unimaginable in the early part of the twentieth century, it is essential to have some understanding of these developments and integrate them with the basics of the Christian message.

Much of the Catholic "package" of beliefs, attitudes, and practices we inherited in our Catholic upbringing was shaped at a time when the church was at the center of western society and when its authority was unquestioned. The package was also shaped within a worldview which was quite primitive by the standards of the new millennium, whether we consider the worldview of the first centuries of Christian history, the Middle Ages, or of the nineteenth century. Scripture was understood and interpreted in a literalist fashion, as if God personally dictated every word and every event happened exactly as recorded. These factors contributed to producing a very stable, systematized package that held together well and provided a cohesive religious worldview for Catholics. The diagram to the right illustrates some of the elements of this package and its influences.



In our lifetime there have been dramatic changes. The church no longer holds center stage; people in western society readily question authority; our understanding of planet Earth's place in the universe has changed, and with it our knowledge about its age and the way life developed here. Scripture scholarship now provides us with different ways of understanding and interpreting Scripture. Historical scholarship reveals to us that some beliefs and practices we thought went back to the time of Jesus and the apostles appeared only in the Middle Ages or even later. Now the "package" seems to be under attack, and, indeed, the factors mentioned above have had an extraordinary impact on Catholic life since Vatican II.

We face a choice. We can immerse ourselves in the "package" and try to fight off all the influences that could persuade us to modify or radically change our beliefs and practices. Or, we can educate ourselves to understand and be conversant with key influences that impinge on our faith, then engage in the challenging task of deepening our appreciation of what we believe in the light of these influences.

We need to appreciate that our contemporary questions about God, Jesus, the church, ourselves, and what we look for in church authority and leadership have their roots both outside of as well as inside the church.

For many adult Catholics, the reforms of Vatican II, as well as the Vietnam War and the church's ruling against contraception, shattered a prided sense of uniformity of belief and practice. These events occurred in the context of western culture questioning blind obedience to authority and urging individuals to take personal responsibility for decisions affecting their lives. For a significant number of Catholics, these events and influences triggered an unheralded response: a refusal to keep giving unquestioning obedience to church authority; an insistence on using their own reasoning to reexamine in searching ways the religious worldview in which they had been nourished; the desire to be treated as adults capable of accepting responsibility. They were also prepared to cast off the fear (often the consequence of Catholic theology) that had prevented them from being

assertive, and they demonstrated their willingness to walk away from the established forms of Catholic ritual and religious practice if these were not relevant to their life's journey.

Gallup polls in America have recorded this extraordinary shift in adult American Catholic attitudes and practices: 70 percent of those surveyed think being a good Catholic is not dependent on going to Mass every Sunday. In 1987, 79 percent opposed the papal prohibition on artificial birth control; in 1992, that had risen to 87 percent. Seventy-four percent believe that divorced and remarried Catholics should be able to remain Catholics "in good standing." In 1971, 49 percent approved of married clergy; by 1987 the approval had risen to 70 percent. In 1992, 90 percent of American Catholics believed that someone could dissent from church doctrine and still remain a good Catholic.¹

Some Catholics would say these surveys simply reflect a period of sad decline from solid church teaching. The Spirit of God could not be saying anything valid here! Things have got out of hand; it is time to recapture and harness the horse that has bolted!

But it is not as simple as that.

The retired archbishop of San Francisco, John Quinn, in an address at Oxford University on June 29, 1996, spoke of the "new situation" in the church today,

...shaped by the shattering of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the communist dictatorships, by the awakening of China and her movement into the political and economic world of the 20th century, by the movement toward unification in Europe, by a new and spreading consciousness of the dignity of women, by the arrival of an immense cultural diversity in the church, by the insistent thirst for unity among Christians. This new situation is not only political, economic, cultural and technological. It is marked as well by a new psychology. People think differently, react differently, have new aspirations, a new sense of what is possible, new hopes and dreams. In the church there is a new consciousness of the dignity conferred by baptism and the responsibility for the mission of the church rooted in baptism.²

There is no way we can turn a blind eye and pretend these factors do not profoundly affect religious belief and practice.

The task today, being mindful of and realistic about these influences, is to help people converse with one another and share the convictions and the questions they have about God, Jesus, the church, themselves, their religious worldview, and their bonding with the rest of creation.

Some aspects of this task are clear: helping Catholics re-image and re-language some of the basics of their faith; providing a cohesive religious worldview that is in harmony with a contemporary understanding of our place in the universe; introducing adult Catholics to some of the insights of contemporary Scripture scholarship; examining the relationship of Christianity with other world religions; and articulating and promoting a spirituality which energizes, encourages, and challenges.

The work of adult faith development is obviously of major importance here in attempting to bridge the gap between scholarship and the faith understanding of all believers. Adult faith educators are bridge builders: they listen, engage, converse, present information, challenge, and open doors in the hope that people will step in and continue to search and deepen their faith. Hopefully, this book will assist in that task.

The book has five main goals:

- first, to help Catholics and other Christians develop a sense of awesome wonder about the God in whom they believe;
- second, to help them better appreciate the place of Jesus in human affairs;
- third, to help them realize that the same Spirit of God that moved in Jesus moves in all of us;
- fourth, to take that last statement really seriously, and to consider how it challenges all of us to be the presence of God in the world today;
- fifth, to explore the type of church leadership and authority we look for in a new millennium.

A broader intent is to accomplish this within a framework or worldview that is cohesive and makes sense to the modern mind. The

content must be able to stand up to the rigorous questioning prevalent today about any religious worldview. It must engage present scientific understanding about our place in the universe, the development of life on this planet, the connectedness of all people with one another and with life on this planet, and the reality of a God who is in all, with all, and through all.

Underlying all these goals is a very simple desire: to get people talking about what they believe, why they believe what they believe, what are the foundations of their belief system, and what are the deeper questions of faith and meaning they may never have articulated for themselves before. The years of working in adult faith formation have convinced me that young adults, the middle-aged, and the elderly find themselves engrossed in stimulating and rewarding conversation when issues of faith are approached this way.

A major concern with this book is to communicate with the reader in simple language—an approach which has its advantages and inherent disadvantages. But if the task of adult faith development is to engage people's experiences and questions, present information for reflection and discussion, and so develop understanding and growth in faith and commitment, that task requires simple language if it is to involve as many people as possible.

Each chapter ends with some questions for reflection and/or discussion. Several chapters also offer a brief recommended reading list. The main criterion for recommending a book (apart from the obvious fact that its matter is worthwhile) is that it be simple enough to read. Readers wanting more technical resources are referred to the Notes and the Bibliography.

The word "church" refers to the Catholic Church, but this usage is in no way desired or intended to limit the reality of "church" to the Catholic Church. While parts of the book are particularly focused on the Catholic Church, much of it is applicable to all Christian churches.

NOTES

1. Fries, Heinrich, *Suffering From the Church* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995). The survey appears in a Foreword by Leonard Swidler, pp. 12–13.
2. Quinn, John, "Considering the Papacy," in *Origins*, July 18, 1996, vol. 28, no. 8, p. 120.