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Who Will Labor in the Vineyard?

The New Catholic Mentality and Religious Commitment

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Abstract

This paper explores the origins of a new Catholic mentality, marked by low levels of commitment to, but not complete disengagement from, the religious tradition. This poses challenges for the vitality of many Church sponsored institutions, especially in countries which share a Western culture. The paper focuses on better understanding the lack of strong commitment amongst younger Catholics and points to changes in socialization and the rise of personal spiritualities as key explanatory factors. Any discussion of the future configuration of Catholic institutions is dependant on how this primary challenge of low religious commitment is addressed.

Introduction

[1] In recent times there has been much comment on about how Catholic educational institutions can best configure themselves to cater for the radically changed cultural context within which they operate (Schreiter; Green and O'Keefe; Schweitzer). Ryan, for example, looks at three models of Catholic schools for the future that delineate an exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralistic function (22-23). These distinctions are largely based on the enrollment patterns that schools should follow. This type of discussion is, however, premised on an assumption that Catholic schools, or other institutions, have the resilience to reconfigure themselves to suit changing circumstances. This assumption needs to be interrogated especially in the light of the serious difficulties many Catholic educational institutions face maintaining a vibrant internal culture that is reflective of a purposeful religious community. This issue is not coterminous with the attraction of many Catholic educational institutions to either prospective students or staff. The fact that many want to study or work in these places is reflective of a change in the religious culture where personally chosen association has often replaced high levels of personal, communal

commitment. Central to this discussion is the need for vibrant religious institutions to be able to point to a critical mass of highly committed members who can act not merely as cultural participants but cultural animators, that is, ones who cultivate and not merely support the ethos of the institution. The formation of this critical mass, however, is imperiled by what will be called here a new Catholic mentality that is more accommodating of low levels of allegiance and affiliation.

The New Catholic Mentality

[2] Rymarz (2006) remarks that one way of conceptualizing contemporary Catholicism is to make a contrast between communitarian and committed expressions. He argues that in recent decades the Church has been successful in promoting communitarian religious identity. This features, amongst other things, a strong emphasis on inclusion and relatively low boundaries between believers and the wider culture. In terms of a more committed expression of religious belief, the Catholic Church and many other mainstream Churches have been far less successful. Commitment here is primarily understood in sociological terms, following Stark and Glock, and is made up of five factors: beliefs, practice, knowledge, experience, and consequences (14-15). Committed members, therefore, have strong religious beliefs, have a high level of participation in religious practices and rituals, are well networked with other like-minded people, and are prepared to devote time, and other resources, to their religious community. They know, and seek to know more, about their religious community, its history, teachings, and demands. Committed believers also have characteristic religious experiences both of a personal and communal nature. Their membership in a religious community has clear, direct, immediate, and long-lasting consequences for how they live their lives.

[3] D'Antonio and his colleagues provide another measure of commitment that has some overlap with what is being used here (10). In their work, respondents must meet three conditions to be considered highly committed; they must state that the Church is the most important part, or among the most important parts of their lives, indicate that they will never leave the Church, and attend Mass at least weekly. In whichever way they are described, the critical point is that committed followers are vital to the cultivation of the religious identity of Church sponsored universities and schools. Committed believers are the ones who often fill the institutional roles that animate the religious dimension of schools, colleges, and universities. If institutions lack committed members, religious identity becomes increasingly problematic, and this in turn has serious implications for the ability of educational institutions to adapt to changing circumstances in a positive and proactive way. Proportionality is important here. Religious institutions can survive if a relatively small number of people associated with them display low levels of commitment. If the proportion grows, however, then the vitality of the institution is imperiled. This is the concept, developed by Iannaccone, of the religious free rider. Free riders, in essence, use the services provided by organizations but do not contribute much to the group.

[4] To illustrate the dimensions of the problem facing Catholic educational institutions, consider three international examples. Miscamble argues that the Catholic identify of Notre Dame, perhaps America's most prominent Catholic university, is being imperiled by the lack of committed Catholics on faculty. In a response to this concern, McGreevy, while

acknowledging the importance of so-called critical mass in maintaining the religious integrity of religious institutions, points out a much deeper dilemma. The fundamental difficulty that Notre Dame and other Catholic universities face is that there are insufficient numbers of Catholic scholars in general in the academy that would be in a position to correct the type of hiring discrepancies that Miscamble points out (on the history of secularization in higher education in the U.S., see Smith). McGreevy quotes a 2006 Harvard study of the top fifty research universities in the United States that showed that only six percent of tenured or tenured track scholars in the arts, sciences, or business areas of the universities self identify as Catholic. He points out that as far as the study allows there seems to be no shortage of academics, even very senior ones, who could be identified as nominal Catholics. The pool, however, for Catholic universities who wish to employ committed Catholic faculty is very low and appears to be diminishing. A similar issue, one that seems to be particularly acute in filling positions of leadership, has been pointed out in Canadian Catholic institutions of higher learning. Timothy Scott, President of St. Joseph's College at the University of Alberta, commented in the *Western Catholic Reporter* on the difficulty that several Canadian Catholic colleges had, despite exhaustive measures, replacing the current clerical presidents, who have exceeded the retirement age (11-12). Hiring of faculty who can teach the variety of course that the colleges offer is not an issue; indeed, competition for these places is keen. Instead, providing credible religious leadership, something that arises out of strong personal commitment, proves exceedingly difficult.

[5] Another manifestation of the same problem is in Catholic elementary and high schools. In an Australian study, Carlin and his colleagues report on a shortage of suitable applicants applying for principalships in Catholic schools across Australia. There is no shortage of teachers, in contrast, who wish to work in the system and support the ethos of the schools. On the basis of their research they propose that one of the reasons for the reluctance of senior teachers and others to apply for these positions is that they require a far greater commitment to overtly Catholic principles. Although there is little opposition to these principles, comparatively few are prepared to strongly and publicly identify with them. Without committed leadership it is hard to see how the religious integrity of Catholic educational institutions, be they colleges or high schools, can be maintained.

[6] The religious expression of many contemporary Catholics is different from previous generations and is indicative of a new mentality. One important aspect of this is being highlighted here, namely, a more casual, less committed type of religious affiliation. While not disavowing Catholic identity completely, it is weaker than previous generations. In the meantime, the lack of a sufficient cohort of emerging committed educational leaders and faculty will become a dominant issue in wider educational discourse as more and more committed members of Catholic educational institutions retire. A key question then becomes, how can this lack of commitment be understood? Two key factors will be addressed here: first, the seeming attractiveness of spirituality as opposed to communal expressions of belief and worship, and second, the decline in religious socialization.

The Rise of Spirituality

[7] One important factor in establishing high levels of religious commitment is participation in a community held together by common beliefs and worship. A critical example of this is

involvement in communal rituals that reinforce both religious belief and express solidarity with other believers. Belief then becomes not something that the individual does but something that is part of a public practice that holds a group together. This in turn leads to solidarity with others who share the same commitment. For Catholics, the key expression of communal belief is participation in the sacraments, most notably in the celebration of the Eucharist. A number of studies have shown a steady, if not spectacular, decline in sacramental participation rates amongst Catholic in a number of Western countries (Hill and Bowman; Bibby 1988; Chaves; Hamburg). Paradoxically, the number of younger Catholics who self-identity as Catholic is far higher than those who regularly attend Mass (Evans and Keeley: 51). Many seem willing to retain some connection to the Church, but are keen not to overplay this and appear to be overtly religious. Kaiser notes a characteristically Italian variation on this sentiment: when Romans asked about their religion, they are apt to reply, *siamo cattolici, non fanatici* – we're Catholics, but we're not fanatics (61). Many Catholics have lost a sense of the communal, orthodox faith of the Church but retain their own sense of what faith means in modern society (on nominal affiliation, see Gibbs). By their very nature, however, such views do not foster high levels of religious commitment. Rather they place the individual in a position where communal expressions of faith have been replaced by a far more idiosyncratic and less demanding form of religious allegiance.

[8] Bellah and his colleagues captured this growing idiosyncratic religious sentiment well when they quote the classic self-description given by "Sheila Larson," a young nurse in their study:

> I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith carries me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice. . . It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other (221).

[9] Sheila is the personification of a movement toward individualism in religious expression. A feature of this transition is an emphasis on morality, what we do, and a retreat from creedal conviction, what we believe. Wuthnow, writing fifteen years after Bellah and his colleagues, argues that this transition identified as Shielaism has continued (87-116). This has developed to a dominant form of spiritual expression where the emphasis is no longer on dwelling or belonging to a faith community, but on a more amorphous sense of personal seeking on one's own terms. Yamane, commenting on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the study by Bellah and his colleagues, commented, "if Sheila Larson had today's language available to her during the interview, she would surely have offered the contemporary mantra, 'I'm spiritual not religious'" (183).

[10] This sentiment is also indicative of the resilience of the religious impulse. The relentless march of atheism predicted by the nineteenth century positivists has not occurred. When more traditional forms of religious belief and expression become less common, they often emerge in new and different forms. Basing his argument of the ideas of Talcott Parsons, Bell sees religion as a human universal that is as typical and normative as language. The fact that many today see spirituality, or something similar, as replacing religion should not give confidence to those concerned with the future of religious groups. This is an indication that

these groups are not meeting a basic human need and that the connection between religion and spirituality has been loosened or even severed. When this occurs there are a number of consequences; perhaps the most pertinent here is a decline in strong levels of commitment to any particular religious creed and community, which is often replaced with a spirituality that is divorced from traditional religious expression.

[11] Mason and his colleagues describe spirituality as one of the "master ideas in Western culture" (11-16). Its origins can be traced to the philosophers of ancient Greece, where it was defined as immaterial and gave rise to human attributes such as thought and reason. Later when associated with Christianity, spirituality was seen as the way an individual Christian lived out their beliefs. It could be contrasted with the public worship of the Church and was centered on private, interior, and personal practices such as prayer. When Teresa of Avila, for example, is described as having an intense spiritual life, this is the sense of the term that is being used. In contrast, when a person was described as lacking spirituality, the term often referred to a superficial, external practice of religious duties and obligation without much personal conviction (Cuskelly).

[12] In recent times, however, spirituality has been used to describe a far wider range of practices and experiences. So much so that Carrette and King have caustically remarked, "spirituality has no universal meaning and has always reflected political interests" (30). A major thesis of theirs is that spirituality has become a private affair in contemporary culture and more importantly has become commodified. Of particular interest is the sense that Yamane uses the term in contrast to religion. Spirituality here often retains some of its original meaning, namely, being an interior and personal response, but it allows individuals almost complete freedom in what they chose to incorporate into a worldview and places little in the way of demands on the individual. Most importantly, it does not act as a transformative agent, leading to strong commitment, but allows individuals to retain a loose association with the transcendent – one defined on their own terms. To anticipate Lonergan's poetic analogy of conversion, it bears little resemblance to falling in love with God. In fact, if traditional Catholic spirituality, as exemplified by Teresa of Avila, was an intense, almost-all-consuming, effort to get closer to God, the new sense of the term, by contrast, can be seen as keeping God at a distance.

[13] The idea of spirituality being disassociated from any strong connection with the divine is supported in the literature. In his discussion of contemporary uses of spirituality, Bouma notes that in its common usage it only has a tangential reference to God as one of a variety of external references that serve as the focus of the spiritual quest (7-16). The external reference can be some type of divinity, an aspect of the natural world, or, more typically, a sense of the other. This type of diffuse spirituality tends to reinforce decisions already taken rather than encourage new insights and perspectives. Rather than being seen as the practical expression of religion, spirituality, in this sense, can be quite remote from a particular religious tradition (Tacey). It may not involve any tangible connection to a community in terms of participation in common worship, services, or expressing belief in public communal forms. This type of communal expression would, to return to Sheila Larsen's language, violate "my own little voice." The spiritual domain then becomes essentially a personal and private one without a common external referent.

[14] Many today have a highly individualized spiritual expression, which does not have a generalized applicability and cannot easily be related to others. Without recourse to a wellspring of religious symbol, belief, and metaphor, spirituality runs the risk of lacking creative and formative power and commonality of meaning. To return to Teresa of Avila, when she wrote of her spiritual experiences, it was in a language that was replete with reference to the spiritual universe of Catholicism. This provided a ready reference point. Without this connection, spirituality becomes idiosyncratic, superficial, and undisciplined; it is certainly not conducive to the development of a strong Catholic identity. Most importantly, it does not lead to the high levels of personal commitment that are vital if religious institutions are to retain vitality. Rather, the movement of religious expression to more personal and private forms enfeebles the whole notion of a strong committed communal identity.

Changes in Religious Socialization

[15] Another pivotal factor that works against high levels of religious commitment is a lack of religious socialization, which has typified in recent times the growth to maturity of many Catholics. Cornwall notes that religious socialization is of critical importance in encouraging and maintaining religious beliefs and practices (1987). Socialization allows the social base of religion to develop. Once this is established, individuals know how to live in the religious world inhabited by those with similar commitments. Religious socialization gives rise to shared views and expression. A historical dividing point in religious socialization is the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965; on the impact of the council, see Stacpoole), which allows us to distinguish between the socialization of younger Catholics from that of earlier generations (for an overview of religious socialization, see Kelley and De Graaf).

[16] D'Antonio and his colleagues address the direction of the trend of religious affiliation amongst Catholics, which they argue is toward less commitment and greater disaffiliation over time (48-52). Reporting comparisons between generational cohorts of American Catholics, there is a marked contrast between those Catholics born before 1960 and all those born later. Many younger Catholics indicate an intermediary or open-ended "wait and see" attitude, which has also been noted by Baigent. This research confirms the view that the radical change in religious belief, practice, and levels of commitment among Catholics occurs between preconciliar generation and those immediately following them (Bouma and Mason). This is the classic generation gap. Recent generations of Catholics, with regard to religious belief and practice, resemble each other quite closely. A significant watershed for many Catholic educational institutions, thus, will occur with the inevitable retirements of the preconciliar generations, a time that is now upon us.

[17] For preconciliar generations of Catholics in many Western countries, the transition from childhood to adult modes of religious affiliation were marked by a number of structural processes that ensured that the transition was, at least, heavily supported. Rahner has noted that many of the social supports and preconditions that allowed for explicit faith have been eclipsed in the modern world. Moloney, writing about his childhood, describes this era well:

> I had been brought up a practicing Catholic and the social and cultural setting of my life was steady as a rock. There was no need for the Bible, as I had the Pope, the Bishop, the Priest and weekly Mass. My belief system came

> from the family and a Catholic schooling, reinforced by the weekly sermon, the Sacraments of the Catholic Church, and various devotions (168).

[18] In the 1960s the process of religious socialization was dramatically challenged. Bausch calls this "the "collapse of total Church" (155). Another way of describing this change was a movement away from a monopolistic Catholicism where the choices and options available to Catholics were heavily prescribed. Changes in socialization did not just affect Catholics; Bendroth has noted the impact on mainstream Protestants was also severe: "By the early 1960s scattered rumblings of doubt among Protestant denominational officials were clearly audible within the larger church, echoing the louder reverberations of a culture in the throes of rapid transformation" (119). Post-conciliar Catholics have little knowledge of the cohesive Catholic culture of the preconciliar world where religious socialization was a dominant influence (Rymarz 2004). As they were growing up, many of the factors that had assisted the religious socialization of earlier generations were either no longer in place, gravely weakened, or in contradiction of each other. As Greeley puts it, what most affected religious socialization from a Catholic perspective was the rapidity, in historical terms, of change: "When you change something that which was unchangeable for 1,500 years, you are going to create a religious crisis" (1982: 86).

[19] Berger and Luckmann have noted that successful socialization is dependent on common and agreed divisions in society and where socializing agents and forces are directed to the same end, calling this "a high degree of symmetry between objective and subjective reality" (163). In medieval times, for example, the socialization of individuals was preconfigured at birth, with family and other institutions providing socialization toward a common goal, "a knight is a knight and a peasant is a peasant, to others as well as themselves" (164). In contemporary culture, however, socialization is a far more asymmetrical and contentious phenomenon. Socialization processes are competing and if religious socialization is not strong enough then individuals will be formed and socialized into other worlds.

[20] Religious socialization is largely mediated by family, peers, and institutions. In a culture where religious socialization is strong all three factors work together to provide, if not a seamless, then a harmonious process where the individual learns, in many often subtle ways, what it means to be a member of that religious group. In a seminal fashion a religious imprint is left on core identity as the person matures (Templeton and Eccles). In many Western countries, however, religious socialization is not strong, especially in the critically important early years when core identity is being established.

[21] Hammond distinguishes between core identity and chosen identify. Core identity such as being born female or into a particular family cannot be chosen and tends to endure for life in some form. Socialization then in the early stages of life is especially important as this establishes core identity. Religious socialization during this period is primarily in the family and augmented elsewhere. Contemporary culture, however, places the family under pressure and this makes the task of religious socialization much harder (see Potvin and Sloane; De Hart). Sabe argues that the classical model of religious socialization is now so tenuous that it needs to be replaced by a new conceptual model. The family dynamic of many households in which post-conciliar Catholics grew up made familial religious socialization problematic. Practices such as family prayer, for example, became quite unusual in the post-conciliar era

(Rymarz and Graham). Older siblings who in the past may have acted as mentors often discontinued religious practice leaving an example for younger brothers and sisters to follow.

[22] Secondary socialization develops core identity (Berger and Luckmann: 130). It involves other agents such as peer groups, institutions such as schools and churches, as well as general cultural norms and plays an important role in religious socialization (Cornwell 1997). Secondary socialization too was compromised when post-conciliar Catholics were maturing. An example of this was the declining authority of the great institutions of society, such as the government, to command respect and to be followed. General cultural norms also worked against religious socialization as the divergence between the cultures of the Church, at least in a formal sense, and the wider culture became greater and greater. In the 1950s, for example, most people at least went to Church on Sunday, which was seen as a day of rest. Contrast this with the time-pressures on families today, who are involved in sports and other activities on the weekend. This is a mundane but very practical example of one of the factors undermining religious socialization. Even if a child and his or her family were disposed to go to Mass on Sunday, the societal weekend norm of the child participating in sport puts many families in an awkward position. They will have to choose to do something others are not doing.

[23] The movement from seeing religious practice and affiliation as part of an accepted cultural identify to a voluntary decision is a subtle change but one which has a profound impact. In earlier times, Christian churches could look on society to reinforce the values and attitudes they were trying to inculcate into children and teenagers. Bibby calls this culturally dominant socialization, where the culture dominates individual groups in society (1993: 228). In many Western countries this is no longer always the case. In a culture of what Roof and McKinney call a "new volunteerism" where individuals respond to immediate needs from particular circumstances, it is up to each social agency to provide a rationale for people to remain associated once life circumstances change (27). As Appleby points out, however, the centrifugal forces of modern culture make the task of religious groups in this area difficult, due largely to the hegemony of the view that no decision or belief is more than a personal choice, one option among many. Any group that wishes to claim strong allegiance must work especially hard at overcoming this cultural tendency to retain many loose associations, with no one being privileged.

[24] For many Catholics who were born after the Council and who should be now moving into leadership positions in educational institutions most of the traditional markers of Catholic identity disappeared very quickly and were not replaced with new distinctive rituals (Greeley 1985). For example, the practice of confession or first rite reconciliation all but disappeared, and popular expressions of piety such as solidarities or confraternities became far less popular and visible (O'Farrell). Many have described this breakdown of cohesive religious communities as depillarization, a process where societies are no longer organized along confessional lines. When this occurs, secularization is extremely rapid as evidenced by the social transformation of the Netherlands and of Quebec. Dekkar and Ester estimate that the percentage of the Dutch population whose "primary ideological perception" was Catholic declined from 42% to 26% between 1958 and 1975 (the figures for the Reformed Church are even starker) (330). Bibby reports a decrease in weekly Mass attendance in Quebec from 83% in 1957 to 23% in 1990 (1993: 10).

[25] The emphasis placed on the harmony and continuity between the culture of the Church and the wider culture extenuated the loss of identity. Finke and Stark would describe this as moving from a high tension model where a group has many beliefs and practices that set them apart from its environment to a low tension model where such difference are relatively slight (43-44). A group that sees itself in opposition to others has a sure means of promoting socialization into the group as the surrounding culture can be seen as hostile and unwelcoming. MacLaren argues that religious communities in the third millennium need to develop a more distinctive identity (197). He points out that the "dark side" of distinctiveness is sectarianism. Nonetheless, sectarian structures provide a way for a group to develop and strengthen its identity. Generations of Catholics, however, have been brought up in an era where denominational differences were far less important than in earlier times and where they were no longer the out group – the group experiencing alienation or discrimination (Bouma).

[26] The post-conciliar era also had a sense that much of what Catholics had believed in the past had changed or would so in the future. As a result, many Catholic beliefs and teachings were challenged in a way that was unimaginable before the Council. In such an atmosphere it was understandable that many were reluctant to strongly proclaim a Catholic position on a range of issues. This hesitancy resulted in some legitimate confusion about what were the important parts of the tradition, how these should be passed on, and whether strong commitment to any view was prudent given the fluidity of recent teachings. It is a natural human response to hold off strong, and at times costly, commitment if there is a perception that change is in the wind.

[27] The formative religious experiences then of many Catholics who are now approaching middle age tended to be more diffuse and idiosyncratic. What was often lacking was a connection with the transcendent dimensions of Catholicism. Religious commitment is far more likely to be nurtured when it can be linked to what Stark and Finke call an exchange with the Gods (91). Barron uses the term "lost generation" to describe those Catholics who came to maturity in this era (193). He comments that a characteristic of this time was that "the biblical and theological tended to be replaced by the political, the sociological, and, above all, the psychological" (17). These Catholics find it difficult to easily recall adolescent experiences that marked their enculturation into a religious tradition. This can be contrasted with earlier generations who have a far stronger, not always positive, recollection of being raised Catholic (Rymarz 2004: 150). These experiences have been translated into an almost literary sub genre. It is unusual, by contrast, to find novels that depict growing up Catholic in, e.g., the 1970s. One constant feature of this era, however, was the strong enrollment in Catholic schools (Martin).

[28] The Catholic school, then, in the absence of other formative influences, became a critical factor in the religious socialization of post-conciliar Catholics. Rymarz has identified a number of significant points that characterized their formative experience in schools (2004: 152). These include a positive experience. Younger Catholics do not generally report negative or hostile feelings about their time in Catholic secondary schools. The religious education they received, however, lacked an educational focus. In the absence of other forms of instruction, post-conciliar Catholics have a relatively poor understanding of the content areas normally associated with Catholicism. Many Catholics were never presented

with a strong and coherent Catholic worldview, either at home or in educational settings. This resulted in a lack of religious content knowledge that has been widely discussed (Flynn and Mok; Cavadini). Although it is not decisive, individuals are far less likely to commit strongly to something if they lack an understanding of it. Because their religious socialization was weak, many Catholics have not developed a religious vocabulary that would allow them to feel at home with the tradition at least in a cognitive sense (Rochford). When many post-conciliar Catholics speak about their lives and aspirations, they frequently use spiritual or non-religious language to describe themselves and their lives. They see questions about God, prayer, and spiritual flourishing under the rubric of personal autonomy. Religious socialization, where it did occur, placed great importance on experience as opposed to direct instruction and participation in religious ritual (Strommen and Hardel).

[29] In the absence of a strong communal religious socialization, like many of their contemporaries, post-conciliar Catholics constructed an identity from the forms that dominated the wider culture. This resulted in a personal, private, and atomized identity that made them very receptive to the rise of spirituality discussed earlier (Loeb: 34-45). For many Catholics their socialization was into a culture that was suspicious of authority. For them the idea of unquestioned magisterial teaching was not even a memory, much less something to which they could give strong allegiance. With this background many Catholics developed a pattern of religious life where strong expressions of belief and practice, such as regular Mass attendance, were lacking (Pirola; Turner). In their place were weaker connections characterized by attendance at Church on special occasions such as Christmas, weddings, baptisms, and funerals. The predominate link to the Church for many Catholics, in this analysis, is their ongoing connection with Catholic schools. As their experience of them was on the whole positive, many parents want the same experience, which was not one of religious enculturation, for their children.

[30] In summary, the expression of Catholicism that many post-conciliar Catholics grew to maturity in can be described as communitarian. It is characterized by individuals seeing themselves as part of a wider group, but this is not part of their core identity and as such does not have a strong impact on the way they live. Being Catholic brings with it advantages such as being able to maintain links with schools and with family of origin. Many Catholics are comfortable with this level of commitment and are averse to being seen as stridently religious. There is more than a strong echo here of Sheila Larsen's, "I'm not a religious fanatic." Encouraging higher levels of religious commitment is a difficult task. Many Catholics tend to reflect the views of the wider society into which they were acculturated with often little opposition. Just like their peers, they do not embrace commitment or close affiliations, always wanting to keep their options open.

[31] For many the option of working in a Catholic educational institution is an attractive one. They have a broad familiarity with this type of institution and many have positive, if weak, memories of their time as students in Catholic schools. What is lacking, however, and this is critical to the argument being made here, is a strong commitment to the institution based on religious convictions. To be a Catholic is one thing, but to place demands on this allegiance is something that many Catholics today are not prepared to do.

Conclusion

[32] One of the indications in the decline of a religious group is when a wide ranging institutional presence is not animated by a strong personal commitment on the part of individuals who work in these institutions. To use a scriptural metaphor: vibrant religious institutions need a plentiful supply of those who are prepared to labor in the vineyard. In this paper this labor has been likened to having a high level of commitment to the tradition that inspired these institutions. This commitment is undermined by the rise of a new mentality that, while not eschewing association with the tradition, does not readily result in high levels of commitment.

[33] The new Catholic mentality is aligned more to personalized expressions of spirituality than to communal creedal positions. For many, their sense of religious identity is much more diffuse, marked by weak positive experiences, the absence of core religious socialization, and the primacy of choice in a culture of volunteerism. As a consequence of this there was never a strong or enduring religious memory.

[34] Lack of socialization and the availability of less demanding forms of spiritual expression have other important consequences. The religious experience of many younger Catholics is not one that they wish to disassociate from completely. For many the weak association, while not cultivating strong commitment, does not close the door to a more fragile connection. All of this is indicative of what can be called a new Catholic mentality. The experience of transition that was so formative of older Catholics is no longer a dominant discourse. What has replaced it is far more ineffable and more easily typified by what is absent and as such is not reactive or hostile. Many Catholics today, especially younger ones, are aware of the options available to them and can be typified as consumers. Working in or attending Catholic educational institutions remains an attractive option. The dilemma for educational planers interested in maintaining or developing a strong religious identity for these institutions, however, is that many of these Catholics have found for themselves a comfortable niche that does not require of them high levels of commitment. Without sufficient numbers of individual with this type of strong motivation, the ability of Catholic educational institutions to adapt in a credible way to changing cultural patterns is heavily compromised. If this situation is to be at least halted, then new ways of encouraging religious commitment must be initiated. In their absence, weak patterns of allegiance will continue with inevitable consequences for the identity of Catholic institutions.

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