

## “Vatican-lite”

A news report on Pope Benedict’s recent visit to the United States suggested that one of his objectives was to challenge what the reporter called the “Vatican-lite” approach to Catholicism on the part of many American Catholics, the suffix “lite” normally being associated with certain brands of beer that are light on calories or low on alcohol content. The inference was that Rome was concerned that American Catholics may not always be as faithful to Church teaching as they should be, and areas such as contraception and abortion were given as examples. What has brought about this situation, and is it unique only to the Church in America?

In his book *Faith of Our Fathers*, author Eamon Duffy<sup>1</sup> writes:

Roman Catholics have always attributed a special value to their Church’s past, for they believe that the saving truth of God is encountered not merely in the pages of the Bible, but in the proclamation, worship and shared experience of the Christian community – that complex expression of lived faith which we call tradition. Yet in the latter twentieth century the Catholic Church underwent a dramatic and, to many, disturbing transformation, which seemed to open up a deep gulf between modern believers and their past. The reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council, which met from 1962 to 1965, profoundly changed the experience of Catholics at every level... It was an exhilarating time, filled with the sense of momentous and life-giving transformations, the bursting of constraints and the opening of new possibilities.’

Those of us who are, as they say, “of a certain age” were brought up in a Church that was very authoritarian and there was very little, if any, room for “thinking outside the box” as they say today. We learned the basics of our faith in question and answer form from the old ‘penny catechism’ – rote learning but at least we knew where we stood. It began with questions on faith and the twelve articles of the Apostles’ Creed (including grace and sin), moving on to hope, prayer, and charity – that was the first 170 questions. The next 78 dealt with the God’s ten commandments and the Church’s six. A huge amount of what we had to know as Catholics was contained in that section alone. The sacraments followed (that took us up to question 314) and then we moved on to a series of lists that we also learned by heart: three theological and four cardinal virtues; seven gifts and twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit; seven corporal and seven spiritual works of mercy; eight Beatitudes; seven capital sins and their contrary virtues; six sins against the Holy Spirit; nine ways in which we could cause or share in the guilt of another’s sin; three eminent Good Works; three Evangelical Counsels, and “four things to be ever remembered”! - 332 questions so far. The final 38 were about the Christian rule of life and daily (spiritual) exercise.

Modern educationalists may not have anything too complimentary to say about that method of learning and yet few would deny that we grew up knowing a great deal more about the basics of our faith than children seem to these days, but, like a lot of other things, it doesn’t seem to matter. In our multicultural, diversified, politically

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correct society, they will know as much, if not more, about other world religions than about their own, and no one seems to call them to task for such lack of knowledge or practice of the faith. We at least had that much-tested, rote learning foundation upon which to build as we grew older and the theory was that that's what we were meant to do so as to develop a much more mature knowledge of our faith than we had as kids. And the Church encouraged that process by publishing, in 1994, a 600-page updated version of the catechism – no longer questions and answers but a text to be read and digested. Fundamentally nothing has changed, but the very obvious physical difference between the two catechisms is a clear indication of the extent to which our faith knowledge, and how we live that out, should have changed as we grew up.

It is worth repeating that nothing of the basics of our faith has changed - everything that was to be found in the old catechism is to be found, albeit greatly expanded and developed, in the new one. How is it, then, that the phrase “Vatican-lite” can be applied to the faith-practise of many Catholics today? Why is it that so many are deciding for themselves which Church teachings they will follow and which they won't? Q103 in the old catechism: *How are the faithful on earth in communion with each other? A/: The faithful on earth are in communion with each other by professing the same faith, obeying the same authority, and assisting each other with their prayers and good works.* The new catechism says exactly the same thing though in a little more detail: *Mindful of Christ's words to his apostles: 'He who hears you, hears me', the faithful receive with docility the teachings and directives that their pastors give them in different forms. (para 87) The Roman Pontiff and the bishops are 'authentic teachers, that is, teachers endowed with the authority of Christ, who preach the faith to the people entrusted to them, the faith to be believed and put into practice'.* (para 2034)

As we know only too well, no organisation runs smoothly without some degree of control and management, without guidance and oversight, policies and practices, and without the need for sanctions in the event that they have to be applied. Whether we like it or not, there will always be rules and laws; human nature being what it is we don't seem to be able to function without them. Football is always a good example. The established laws of the game, enforced by national and international bodies, ensure that it will be played in a specific and identifiable way anywhere in the world. A referee is appointed to apply those laws and everyone expects a match to be played according to them. Players can't suddenly decide for themselves that they are going to ignore particular laws simply because they don't like them. If they did, or if the referee failed to do his job properly, matches would descend into chaos. Another example would be the rules of the road. Imagine if anyone of any age was allowed to drive, with or without a licence, or if people could decide for themselves what speed to drive at and which side of road to drive on! And perhaps the most telling example of all, again from Eamon Duffy: “You cannot have soldiers debating the wisdom of their orders in the face of the enemy.”

Even God found laws were necessary, or rather that the people of Israel made them necessary, and so he gave them (and us) his ten commandments as a minimum set of

guidelines for living out their (and our) faith relationship with him. The Church has done the same thing through its precepts or commandments. We can't start deciding for ourselves which laws we will keep and which we won't, or which Church teachings we will abide by, first of all because we don't have that authority, but, secondly, because that sort of self-determination threatens the universal identity of the Church and the unity of the body of Christ. Being a follower of Christ isn't a buffet, a smorgasbord, from which we can pick and choose. When we sign up at our baptism, it's for the whole thing.

Duffy writes: "God calls us not into some future invisible Church, but to the responsibilities of a real community, which will support and nourish us, but which will also make demands on us, demands which may not always seem reasonable or right." The word *seem* is important in that sentence if we truly believe in the Holy Spirit guiding the Church and the God-given charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals that she thereby enjoys. We should accept and follow because we are asked to and not because we are told to or have to. Fidelity freely chosen is a more mature response than obedience for its own sake. As a society we have laws and rules (many based on *natural law*<sup>2</sup>) designed to safeguard the social structures and values that are important to us and we punish those accordingly who disregard or break those laws. In an ideal world we shouldn't need such sanctions if everyone appreciated and accepted the mutual benefit to be gained from respect for the law and, more importantly, respect for one another.

'To reunite all his children, scattered and led astray by sin, the Father willed to call the whole of humanity together into his Son's Church. The Church is the place where humanity must rediscover its unity and salvation.'<sup>3</sup> It is dangerously short-sighted to see the Church simply as an institution rather than the means to salvation which was Our Lord's intention in founding it. It reduces the Church to something "worldly" rather than "other worldly". People begin to treat the Church and its God-given teaching authority the same way they treat authority in general. Also, just as many people these days have no qualms about disregarding inconvenient aspects of the law – especially if there is little perceived risk of sanctions – such is their approach to God's law and the laws of the Church. As I've just mentioned, what is lacking is respect... that and discipline.

It doesn't really matter, as such, whether we like a particular Church teaching or not, or whether it is convenient to us or not. The Church isn't about us as individuals; it's about communion, about unity, about members of the body of Christ together. Again from the catechism: 'The comparison of the Church with the body (of Christ) casts light on the intimate bond between Christ and his Church. Not only is she gathered *around* him, she is united *in* him, in his body (and specifically in) the unity of all her members with each other as a result of their union with Christ.' (para 789) Whilst there are always going to be cultural differences within so universal a Church, we are

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<sup>2</sup> A law of morality that derives from an instinctive sense of right and wrong.

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 845.

called to a unity of belief which also means, with only minor (cultural) variations, a unity of practice.

As we learned from our ‘penny catechism’, one of the most severe penalties that could be imposed by the Church was, and still is, *excommunication*, but, of course, such a severe penalty is, in the strictest sense, only imposed by the Church in the most serious of situations. But it is worth thinking about the fact that if we choose to ignore, or even to reject, certain aspects of Church teaching, then in effect we are “ex-communicating” ourselves – literally separating ourselves, to whatever degree, from the body of the Church and in some cases we may even be excluding ourselves from receiving holy communion because the actions resulting from our choices may be seriously sinful. This was, for example, the reminder that Scotland’s Cardinal O’Brien issued last year to Catholic MPs who would have gone against the Church’s moral teaching by a pro-abortion vote in Parliament. Their defence that they would have been voting for the issue at hand “in conscience” doesn’t really hold water because, whilst we are obliged to follow our conscience, our conscience may be ill-informed. It isn’t simply a matter of making up our mind and it certainly isn’t a matter of coming to a convenient decision or one *we* are convinced is right. Deciding something in conscience means prayerfully considering all the information we can (from God’s teaching and the Church’s teaching) so that our conscience is fully and properly informed through and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The call to unity and fidelity is a constant theme in the New Testament. ‘I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing.’ (Jn 15 v 5) ‘No household divided against itself can stand.’ (Mt 12 v 25) ‘Holy Father, keep those you have given me true to your name, so that they may be one like us.’ (Jn 17 v11) ‘If our life in Christ means anything to you, if love can persuade at all, or the Spirit that we have in common... then be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind.’ (Phil 2 v 1-2) ‘Obey your leaders and do as they tell you, because they must give an account of the way they look after your souls.’ (Heb 13 v17)

Selective observance, selective practice, in other words “being “Vatican-lite”, isn’t an option – we don’t have the authority. The real authority is Jesus Christ’s, a teaching authority that he delegated to the Church he founded to be the means of our salvation. Through baptism we have been called to be members of his body the Church and to build up that body in unity and love, not fragment it through dissent and personal preference. The life of the body is the Holy Spirit: ‘If you love me you will keep my commandments. I shall ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever, that Spirit of truth whom the world can never receive...he is with you, he is in you.’ (Jn 14 v 15-16) Only in unity in his body can we hope to share his Spirit and his life – now and for eternal life.

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