

Where is Catholicism Heading?

Kevin Liston 23 July 2024

The future for Christianity in the Catholic tradition will be through an evolution more profound and far-reaching than any in the last 2,000 years. The world, not just the church, is going through a deep and wide change of era. Central features include the revolution in the methods of science (evidence, data and systematic procedures), awareness of history (the changing progressive development of humanity), widespread loss of trust in institutions, authority and assured progress, disillusionment with the basis of authority (including religious), a growing awareness of personal autonomy and agency and a major shift of attention from the community and social to the personal in relation to how we live our lives.

One consequence of this is that the living out and promotion of the vision, message and meaning of Jesus will be done more extensively at the personal and inter-personal levels. We are moving towards new expressions of spirituality and intentional living with a clearer focus on self-understanding, and personal experience and values. We will be more aware of our responsibility for the standards we live by. Younger generations (and many of our own generation) are already judging us on the authenticity we show in our lives.

Evolving Catholic spirituality.

In some areas, Catholic theology and spirituality are responding to the challenges and opportunities revealed in the change of era. The emerging spirituality offers pointers of the direction we need to make our own and concretise in our living.

This list sets out some of the features of the emerging spirituality. The descriptions are summary and incomplete and must be read as such. However, they do indicate how Catholicism is evolving and developing.

Feature	Evolving spirituality
Believers as subjects/agents	I am constantly changing, growing and evolving as a person through multiple stages or transformations. Changes change me – what I am. I am my experience, knowing, deciding and loving. Spirituality is my making of me to be what I am. It is constitutive of my self. <i>'Being a Christian is not just practicing a religion, it is someone you become.'</i>
God	God is a loving, though not understood, reality underpinning and penetrating all our living and the whole universe. We do not know God directly. We develop our notion of God through our reflection on experience, internal and external, our knowledge of ourselves, others and the world we live in and through the wisdom of our traditions, communities and cultures.
Relationship with God	Becoming subjects, agents in our relationship with God is identical with personal living which is always here and now. In personal living, questions emerge concretely in our concerns, interests, hopes, plans, daring and timidity, risks and playing safe. As they emerge concretely, they are solved concretely. This is not tied down to place or time, culture or epoch. It is catholic with the catholicity of the Spirit. It is not an abstraction that dwells apart from every place or time, culture or epoch. The love of God, being in love with God, can be as full and as dominant, as overwhelming, and as lasting an experience as human love.' (Bernard Lonergan, <i>Existenz and Aggiornamento</i>)

The Good News	The core of the Good News is that we are loved by God: personal integrity and mutual care, compassion and love are being fully alive. Being loved unconditionally is liberating. We are good people from birth, inclined to worthwhile values and love. The immediate corollary is that fullness of life is to be found in being authentic (holy) persons and in loving and caring for others.
Spiritual experience – peak experiences	Spiritual experience (peak experience) is a realisation of being loved by and being in love with God, a mutual relationship of love. <i>'You are the music while the music lasts.'</i> This is the basis for my spirituality, my intentional living and a prime source for my notion of God. Self-transcendence is going beyond my present self to becoming more, from what I am today to what I will be tomorrow, in five years' time, and so on. For Christians, transcendence is open-ended in an affirmation of, and living with, the reality of 'God'. Ultimate transcendence is being open to God without restriction or limitation.
Faith	Faith is a relationship of trust and love, seeing through the lens of being in love with God and living accordingly. It is complementary, not opposed, to looking for evidence of results from what we do and reasons for our expectations. What does our experience tell us? On a human level, a lot of faith is involved when two people commit their lives to one another.
Prayer	Prayer is thinking through and ritualizing, alone and with others, what it means to be in love with God and a follower of Jesus. It is expressed more completely in action than in words.
Feelings	Our feelings reveal our values, what we regard as worthwhile, who and what we love. Personal orientation in life is based primarily on love. 'The heart has reasons that reason does not know'. Ignatius Loyola was on to that with his discernment of spirits (feelings).

Other features undergoing a major rethink include Mass, sacraments, rituals, conversion/transformation, community, doctrines, ecology and organisational engagement. The understanding and commitment of Catholics to these has evolved dramatically.

A core issue seems to be that the church organisation has not kept pace with human development; institutional structures, official positions and directives, preaching and community education do not meet the needs of most Catholics. The organisation seems to be over-focused on the corporate and community dimensions of Catholic living. There are limits to what any organisation can offer in aid of personal living; the church has over-reached its competency in terms of what our Catholic Faith and spirituality have to offer us. Personal authenticity and inter-personal relationships, the heartbeat of Christianity, are increasingly being left to individuals and groups such as Teams to foster and develop.

It appears that the future of Catholicism is in the hands of ordinary Catholics. We have the challenge and opportunity of growing and developing Catholic spirituality – intentional living in the light of the vision and message of Jesus. It is already set up for sharing personal and inter-personal experiences, leading each other to deeper insights into the meaning of Jesus, critical judgement of the sense of the faith, assessing values, mutually supportive commitments and growing care for one another.

A key requirement at this time, it seems to me, is for us to step out, personally and intentionally, from under the domesticating, deadening umbrella of inadequate traditions and customary thinking.