

Evolving Catholic Spirituality

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People of faith and church organisation

Distinguishing between the church organisation and people of faith reflects a growing reality in Australia.

The relevance and role of Catholicism, of the faith of Catholics, is changing. One feature is that Catholics increasingly base their living on a personal position or conviction rather than in conformity with an official church stance.

Of the five million who registered as Catholic at the last census, around 10% are significantly engaged with the church organisation through Mass and sacraments.

For the other 90%, self-identifying as Catholic means they have a sense of what it is to be Catholic but do not regard the church as helpful. From my experience of talking with many of them and reading or hearing about many more, I am convinced that a significant proportion have personalised and interiorised values and attitudes – certainly not discarded them – that resonate with Catholic positions but may be expressed in non-traditional or secular-sounding ways.

A turn to the personal and an evolved understanding of spirituality have contributed to the shift from church organisation to people of faith.

The turn to the personal

Since the mid-1900s, Australians have experienced increasing autonomy and agency in their living, a shift towards greater focus on the personal and a widespread questioning of passive obedience to authority. This is not simply individualism.

Greater individual agency and responsibility have led to a rebalancing of attention from the community and social to the personal in how we live our lives. Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Gandhi, Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan and Richard Rohr are key figures in promoting this shift with a clearer focus on self-awareness, self-knowledge, personal experience and values. Many others could also be listed here.

This universal trend is a major feature of the postmodernist critique of institutions, 'handed down' authority, ideology and power. Questioning religious authority has revealed, in multiple situations, the flaws in claims for obedience and, consequently, dismissal of anachronistic spiritual/religious positions and an erosion of credibility.

Spirituality

Objectively, spirituality is what we believe in, know, our convictions, values, what we regard as worthwhile and build our lives around.

Subjectively, spirituality is how we as subjects draw the threads of our lives together, how we cope with experience, make sense of what we know and believe and find purpose in our deciding and choosing, bringing it all into a coherent integration. As such it refers to the spirit of each person, which is not necessarily religious.

Spirituality is how we integrate the various aspects of our lives, exercise agency, get our personal 'ducks in a row,' aligning what we do with what we know and believe, our values, sense of identity, and our relationships with everyone and everything else – family, friends, neighbours, our environment, the universe and God.

Our spirituality expresses who we are. It is much more than any one aspect of life or one layer of our personality; it is what our lives add up to. It is in the integration of the variety of experiences, meanings, values and commitments that we find our personal identity, our coherence as individuals. In our interactions with others, we discover more of who we are.

This is the thrust, the dynamism, of spirituality and of intentional living.

The transformed spirituality of people of faith

Traditionally, Catholics focused on belief and creeds as the basis for their spirituality. We uncritically derived our morality and standards of behaviour from the handed-down knowledge and prescriptions provided by Jesus, scriptures and the wise people of the past.

Thanks to developments in psychology, sociology, historical research and other human sciences we now have a clearer understanding of the socio-cultural origins, communication paths and historical evolution of doctrines.

Through personal experience, intelligence, insights, reasoning and choices, we have developed an ability to discern what is right and good in our own

circumstances. Catholics call it a 'Sense of Faith' or conscience. We take responsibility for working out our morality and standards of behaviour.

The kin-dom of faith.

Catholics and other people of faith dream of and work for a kin-dom of relationships. 'You reach out; they become kin.' It is a reality found in our everyday living rather than through a special or distinct realm of ritual, liturgy and traditional formulas, in hope for a future divine intervention or a heavenly paradise.

It is here and now, rooted in social and cultural transformation - a reorientation of values, expressed through love (even of our opposers), forgiveness, and concern for people in trouble. It is a reordering of society and culture characterised by equality, inclusion, and care for the marginalized.

We live it in acts of care and kindness - for family, friends, colleagues and strangers. It is discussed, dissected, worked out in conversations over coffee, shared meals, meetings, and a multitude of gatherings and celebrations, including eucharists and sacraments.

This kin-dom is a vision for people everywhere, being themselves living values of integrity, critical thinking, inclusion, equity, compassion and responsibility and collaborating locally, nationally and internationally, creating kinship bonds of solidarity, promoting equal opportunity and quality of life,

It is the vision, message, values and mind of Jesus.

The kin-dom: a better world

The adversarial 'strong man' syndrome (It is almost always men) is now unashamedly on show. It is in media- and money-driven politics, where personal attacks put people down, facts are misrepresented, and any perceived weakness in your opponent is ruthlessly exploited. It is evil and morally bankrupt and must be called out.

We need leaders, religious and civil/political, who stand up and say, 'No' to the 'strong man' syndrome, to bullies and others who exploit the weak and vulnerable.

The kin-dom way is in mutual respect, attentive listening, inclusion, working for consensus, accepting responsibility and speaking up for justice and what is right.

It is visionary but also already a reality in many hearts, relationships and communities. Jesus, Martin Luther King, Gandhi and Romero had such a dream. Pope Francis dares to dream today.

The kin-dom is an uncomfortable, disruptive possibility.