

# Cafeteria Catholics

by Sebastian R Fama

Someone once told me that Catholicism is like a buffet. You take a little from here and you take a little from there, but you don't have to take it all. Of course, this raises an obvious question, if I can reject some of it why can't I reject all of it? But before we accept or reject anything there is another question that we need to ask. Are the teachings of the Catholic Church true? Because if they are I really don't have the option of rejecting any of them, at least not if I am going to act logically.

This whole buffet idea assumes that at least some of Gods directives are arbitrary and of no real consequence. But is that even possible? Jesus said: "One does not live by bread alone, but by EVERY WORD that comes forth from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). So, if we are Christians, that is followers of Christ, we simply don't have the option to disregard anything that He says. We must live by "EVERY WORD" that comes from the mouth of God.

There is something else that needs to be considered here. Jesus said: "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). He never says anything about opinions setting you free, and with good reason. The book of Romans tells us "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). Our fallen nature causes us to deviate from what is good in a variety of ways, sometimes serious and sometimes not so serious. The point is that it is not unusual for us to make mistakes. Our opinions can be seriously flawed without us ever realizing it. Who has never recalled an earlier time and said: "what was I thinking?" The fact that we are fallible disqualifies us from being the arbiters of truth. As Proverbs 3:5 tells us: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight."

Cafeteria Catholics have a tendency to misrepresent the teachings they oppose. Whether this is done on purpose or as a result of a misunderstanding I cannot judge. But the effect is the same. God's commands are ignored. It is not unusual for them to state their opposition to a particular teaching and then claim that Jesus would agree. This is done even when the very teaching they oppose was spelled out by Jesus Himself.

As fallen creatures we can be negatively influenced by others, our emotions, and our prejudices. All too often we focus on what we want in this life. We convince ourselves that we know what's best. But the Bible warns us about the danger of thinking this way. In the book of Proverbs, we read that: "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death" (16:25).

We think we know what is best because we are led by our desires. It is not unusual for people to be obsessed with the here and now. But God thinks long term. His priority for us is our eternal security. And so His commands are ordered toward that goal. Once we understand this we realize that we need to completely trust God. And of course, trusting God is the very definition of faith.

Putting our trust in God usually involves a "dying to self." As the Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). Being open to God's grace is an absolute necessity. If we try to do it on our own the odds are against us. This is evidenced by the fact that most people will choose to go to Hell. And that is exactly what Matthew 7:13-14 tells us: "Enter by the narrow gate; for **the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.**"

Cafeteria Catholics are prone to choosing the path of least resistance. They will often follow cultural norms even when those norms are opposed to the faith. They don't want to be seen as being out of step with society. They forget that Jesus challenged the customs of His day. They forget that as Christians we are called to do the same. And they forget that when we take our direction from the culture the results can be tragic.

At one time popular culture said it was acceptable for a Christian to own slaves, and some did. At another time it was deemed acceptable for a Christian to kill someone who was guilty of heresy, once again and some did. And yet

both of these actions run counter to the Christian faith. In our own day and age, we have prominent Catholic politicians who, for the sake of maintaining their positions, are in favor of abortion. With all that we know about abortion it is hard to understand how any sane adult could be in favor of it.

Scripture warns us about following the ways of the world: "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). Rather you should: "be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). Yes, we live in the world and we should be a light to the world, but we are not to be led by it. The same God who is the author of all truth established a Church and ordained that it would operate in a certain way. Whenever you "don't take it all" you are saying that God made a mistake. It was God who created man. And it is God who is to be worshipped and obeyed. We should never reduce our Creator to some advisor who presents suggestions some of which are good and others not so good.

Some try to do an end run around the Church by claiming to be loyal to Jesus but not to "man-made laws." In their minds if Jesus didn't say a particular thing it is a man-made law and subject to private interpretation. This is a grave error. Jesus entrusted His apostles and their successors with His authority. In Luke 10:16 Jesus very clearly says to His Apostles: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me." If we are to accept Christ into our lives, we must do it on His terms and not our own. Catholic teaching may not always appeal to our fallen nature. However, it always holds up to honest scrutiny.

Some Cafeteria Catholics try to justify their non-acceptance of certain Church teachings by pointing to the writings of dissenting theologians. Theologians can help us to better understand our faith. But they have no authority. Whenever they find themselves opposed to Rome they have effectively abandoned their calling.

Pope John Paul II commented on the practice of Cafeteria Catholicism in a talk to the Bishops in Los Angeles back in 1987. He said:

It is sometimes reported that a large number of Catholics today do not adhere to the teaching of the Catholic Church on a number of questions, notably sexual and conjugal morality, divorce and remarriage. Some are reported as not accepting the clear position on abortion. It has to be noted that there is a tendency on the part of some Catholics to be selective in their adherence to the Church's moral teaching. It is sometimes claimed that dissent from the Magisterium is totally compatible with being a "good Catholic," and poses no obstacle to the reception of the Sacraments. This is a grave error that challenges the teaching of the Bishops in the United States and elsewhere."

Pope Leo XIII was even more forceful in his encyclical "*On the Unity of the Church*." He wrote:

If it be certain that something be revealed by God, and this is not believed, then nothing whatever is believed by divine faith... He who dissents even in one point from divinely revealed truths absolutely rejects all faith, since he thereby refuses to honor God as supreme truth.

I wonder how Cafeteria Catholics would feel if their children adopted their philosophy. Imagine what it would be like if children decided which rules they should obey. A great many of them would stop going to school and I am sure more than a few would have ice cream for dinner every night. No one is expected to live the Christian life on their own strength. Once again, we do all that we do by the grace of God. As we are told in Hebrews 4:16: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." We would do well to remember that even when the truth doesn't appeal to us it is still the truth. And as such we ought to live by it.