

Catholic Dissent

by Sebastian R Fama

The labels Cafeteria Catholicism and Catholic Dissent are often used interchangeably. I don't have a problem with that. But for my purposes I prefer to keep the terms separate. I like to think of Cafeteria Catholics as those individuals who either don't understand what the Church teaches, or they don't care. For the most part their dissent is a personal thing. And then there are people who publicly challenge the Church whenever an opportunity presents itself. These are the people I like to refer to as dissenters.

Dissenters rationalize their actions in a number of ways. Some claim that Church teachings are either out of date or impractical. They claim that requiring people to follow them is unrealistic and an unnecessary burden. Others feel that their above average intelligence (real or imagined) entitles them to ignore Church teaching. Since they can think for themselves, they reason, they don't need a Church telling them what to do. But even the most intelligent among us is a fallen, sinful creature. Scripture teaches us that Christ died for all men (2 Corinthians 5:15). Nowhere does it say that he only died for people with low IQs.

Intelligence can be an important tool. But like any other tool, it can be used for good or evil. The critical difference is not our intelligence but rather God's grace working in us. With the help of God's grace none of His commands are burdensome. With God's grace we see the wisdom in what He requires of us. There is no need to figure it out for ourselves. Christianity is not a do it yourself project. Jesus understood human nature and so He left us a hierarchical Church with Himself as the head. Authentic Christian teaching comes from the top down and not the other way around.

There are organizations with Catholic sounding names that specialize in publicly attacking the Church. One group publishes its own newspaper. They run stories that portray the Church in a negative light. They are also famous for attacking the orthodoxy of Catholics who are faithful to the Church. And of course, they portray themselves as the only group you can go to for the truth. In some cases, retreat houses have become platforms for dissent. Friendly speakers will present dissenting views in the most pleasant of terms. Those who don't have a good understanding of their faith can be easily misled. Those responsible would do well to heed the words of our Savior: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6).

Catholic universities that were once bulwarks of the faith have in some cases abandoned the faith. Professors openly reject Church teaching while at the same time choosing to embrace the values of a declining culture. This of course is a betrayal of their mission. And all of this is done in the name of academic freedom. However, true freedom carries with it the responsibility to be honest.

Sadly, it is also possible to find a priest or a bishop promoting dissenting views. History records many such occasions. Most of the heresies from the early church were formulated and propagated by members of the clergy. The Protestant reformation was started by a priest. When members of the clergy stray, it can have a devastating effect. Because they occupy positions of authority, what they say is given more credence. Thus, it has the potential to cause more harm. We must always remember that our first allegiance is to Jesus Christ. Our relationship with Him must never take a back seat to our relationship with anyone else be they priest or teacher.

Those who oppose the Church are fond of using dissenters to their advantage. Whenever the Church is in the news, media outlets will seek out prominent dissenters to get the "Catholic side of the story." Of course, what is presented is oftentimes a mischaracterization of the faith. This perpetuates an inaccurate view of Catholicism.

Dissenters will sometimes accuse loyal Catholics of not being able to think for themselves. But it is not a matter of thinking or not thinking for oneself. It is a matter of being loyal to Jesus. But since we are on the subject let's think about this for a minute. Even dissenters will tell you that they worship God. You only worship a being that is superior to yourself. If a superior being tells you that something should be done in a certain way logically that is the way it should be done. To conclude otherwise is, without a doubt, not the product of independent thought.

Dissenters also like to characterize loyal Catholics as being legalistic or mean spirited. They prefer to think of themselves as being compassionate. One dissenter told me he prefers to; "Put people before rules." But what if the "rules" are actually God's idea? Is it really compassionate to lead people into rebellion against their Creator? Before He ascended into heaven Jesus said to His apostles: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you**; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

The Church is to teach all that Christ commanded. She is not free to add anything or to leave anything out. We know that she will be faithful in what she teaches because Christ has promised to be with her until the end of the age. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Logic tells us that any Church established by such a God would have to exhibit the same attributes if it were to continue His work. And history has shown us that such is the case. In its 2000-year history the teachings of the Catholic Church have not changed and they never will.

One point needs to be made here. There is a difference between Church teaching (doctrine) and Church law (discipline). Disciplines deal with how we do certain things while doctrines deal with what we believe (faith and morals). Disciplines are subject to change, but doctrines are not. I say this because there are dissenters who see changes in discipline as a precedent for changes in doctrine.

Dissenters will often scoff at apologetics. That is because apologetics supplies us with the evidence for our faith. Evidence gives us certainty. If we have certainty dissenters have a problem. They prefer to believe that there are a lot of "gray areas." And of course, if there are gray areas they feel they can do as they please. Quite often gray areas are created by constructing arguments that ignore one or more critical facts. But to leave out critical facts is to misrepresent. To misrepresent is to lie. And if your cause is just the truth should suffice.

Facts matter because they give us an accurate understanding of reality. Thus equipped we are enabled to make good decisions. Satan is the father of all deception. And his fondest desire is to separate us from God. We should do everything in our power to oppose him. When we are less than honest in representing the faith, we become his ally. That may not be our intent but effectively speaking that is what we become.

The Church doesn't oppose dissent because she doesn't like being questioned. On the contrary the Church goes to extraordinary lengths to demonstrate the reasons for all her teachings. We are always free to question. However, an honest question assumes you are open to an honest answer. I can't tell you how many people I have talked to who want to criticize the Church but don't want to hear a word in her defense. Is this honest? Is this fair? I don't think so.

Some try to justify their rebellion by claiming that Jesus Himself was a dissenter. This is laughable at best. Jesus was an observant Jew. He upheld orthodoxy. He didn't question the teachings of Judaism. He challenged cultural norms and misinterpretations of the Law. In other words He was opposed to the dissenters of His time. He turned over the tables of the money changers because they were making a mockery of the temple (Matthew 21:12-13). He challenged the Scribes and the Pharisees when they abandoned the commandments of God in favor of their own traditions (Mark 7:8-9). But despite all their misbehavior, Jesus recognized their God given authority. Listen to what He says in Matthew 23:1-3: "Then said Jesus to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice.'" Once again, He criticized bad behavior not Church teaching. And we should do likewise.

Dissent provides a rationalization for sin. While the truth can be intellectually compelling, it doesn't always influence our actions. Because of our fallen nature sin can appear attractive. Given enough time we can commit even the most serious sins without the least bit of guilt. With no guilt there is no repentance. With no repentance there can be no forgiveness. With no forgiveness, there is no salvation. And salvation is the whole point of Christianity.