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— How good a Catholic?
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HOW GOOD A CATHOLIC?

By James A. Magner, PH.D., S.T.D.

THE story is told of an observer who inquired about the nature of a certain long parade of men marching in the rain in one of America's principal cities. He was told that this was a demonstration of the Holy Name Society, a national organization of Catholic men. The spectacle was edifying, and he asked what was the purpose of the body.

"To foster respect for the name of God and of Jesus Christ, and to promote clean speech," came the answer from a Catholic who happened to be near by.

"Remarkable!" exclaimed the observer. "You mean to say that all those men are Catholics, and that they don't swear? I had no idea there were so many Catholic men in the country."

"Oh, indeed," replied the other. "That group represents only the Catholics who **don't** swear. You ought to see all those that **do!**"

There is a point to that story. Catholics are not of one pattern. Without a doubt the total number of

Catholics, good, bad, and indifferent, in the United States, is an impressive figure. There are more than 21,000,000, according to the latest figures of the Catholic Directory. Bound together by the same creed and professing spiritual allegiance to the same religious leaders, they form easily the largest church body in America. From merchant prince and intellectual leader to pauper and the most recent and poorly equipped immigrant from the Old World, they are found in every walk and condition of life, raising the largest families in their communities, and giving most promise of the continuance of their stock.

The Catholic Faith makes unusual demands upon its adherents, insisting upon their regular attendance at Sunday Mass, imposing laws of fasting and Friday abstinence, and enforcing extensive regulations concerning marriage. Every year takes its toll of Catholics through the processes of marriage with those of other beliefs, of unfavorable educational influences, rebellion against the Catholic code of morals, and sheer laziness. Nevertheless, each year sees a goodly number of these "fallen aways" return to the practice of their first religion, and a

constant stream of converts is drawn to it through social, marital, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual considerations.

In spite of the perennial attacks made against Catholicism, ranging from the ponderous arguments of university professors to the mean insinuations of yellow journals, the Catholic Church still remains in a healthy condition, with a universal appeal. While many other denominations, resorting to pulpit novelties and innovations, are barely able to keep their doors open, the average Catholic Church is crowded every Sunday, not for one service but for several, and often from five o'clock in the morning to high noon and one o'clock.

The Catholic Appeal

What attracts these people and holds them, year in and year out, at least to an external profession of faith and allegiance in the Catholic Church? Is it the enduring impressions that are drilled into the Catholic youth? No other religion is so insistent upon the religious element in education. There is scarcely a

Catholic who cannot remember at least something of the questions and answers of the so-called "penny" catechism that were hammered into him at home or in the parochial or the Sunday school. Can it be the pressure of vigilant Catholic relations and associates? Particularly in Catholic communities, a lapse from the Faith is equivalent almost to treason, and the "fallen away" or "turn coat" often finds his social position subject to uncomfortable qualifications.

To some extent perhaps it is the attractiveness of Catholic services. In spite of the fact that they are conducted in Latin and that the excellence of the sermon is not always of a compelling character, there seems to be something definite and satisfying about a Catholic function, even for those of other beliefs. The array of religious symbols, the placing of the statues of Christ and the saints, the central location of the altar, and the mystery of the ritual itself, exercise a special charm and leave the impression of peace and calm. Few Catholics who abandon their religion ever feel at home in a Protestant temple, no matter how much energy they put into the attempt. Even those who

have broken their peace with the Church, such as by marrying against its laws, often continue dutifully to attend its services. Many whose practical opposition to its moral principles makes it impossible for them to receive its penitential ministrations still secretly desire to go through the external forms of confession and receive the Holy Eucharist.

What part does personal conviction and satisfaction with the doctrinal and moral teaching of the Church play in holding the allegiance of Catholics? With converts who have "reasoned" themselves into the Church, intellectual arguments undoubtedly play an important part. The same is true of born Catholics whose education and program of reading have been consistently Catholic. The necessity of at least a Catholic point of view as a requisite for keeping the Faith is often demonstrated in the complete loss of Catholic belief experienced by students whose intellectual formation has been directed through contacts with irreligious professors in secondary schools or with anti-Christian reading. This fact is all the more striking when youths who have been reared in the atmosphere of a devout

Catholic home discover that, even against their will, their Catholic practices suddenly appear totally inconsistent with the intellectual viewpoint which they have built up from these extraneous influences.

It is quite probable, however, that the average Catholic is not particularly concerned with the deeper aspects of his religion or disturbed by difficulties, until discrimination against the Church, or personal attacks, arouse his indignation and make his blood boil, or until he is confronted with assertions and questions whose answer he can sense rather than express.

Undoubtedly all these elements enter into the composition of the average Catholic; but they do not give an adequate explanation of faith. Many writers who try to explain the success of Catholicism can see only economic or social motives at work, or at most a combination of fear and sentimentality in religion. This is especially true when they begin to analyze the appeal of the religious life to those who have embraced the calling of a priest, a brother, or a nun. To adopt this attitude is simply to miss the one

great point, outside of immediate divine action, in Catholic Faith. It is the realization of spiritual responsibility that gives logic to the body of Catholic teaching and worship, and a profound spiritual aspiration for the ideals of Christ that makes it of universal appeal. Without the spiritual motive as their basis, Catholic observances become hardly more than a series of mechanical gestures; and without this consideration, the "practical" Catholic may appear as simply a person who manages to be seen at church on Sundays and whose name can be found on the list of contributors.

Fulfilling Church Precepts

It is sometimes maintained that the best Catholic Faith and morals are to be found not infrequently in places where people are not particularly scrupulous about Sunday Mass, Friday abstinence, and other externals that are supposed to mark a good Catholic. Nearly every one is acquainted with the type of militant Catholic who never goes to Mass himself but is ready to blacken the eye of any one who dares say a word against the Church. Then there is the kind who

can be haled into church only for baptism and marriage, but who is particularly anxious to have a Catholic funeral with all possible pomp.

The unusual justification for this broad concept of who may be considered a good Catholic is the statement that many non-church goers lead better lives than some Catholics who observe all the precepts of the Church. "Woe to you, Pharisees," said Christ, "because you love the uppermost seats in the synagogues." In contrasting the Pharisee who boasted, "I fast twice a week: I give tithes of all I possess," with the publican who stood afar off, striking his breast, with the prayer, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner," Christ declared that the latter "went down into his house justified rather than the other." But it is important to note that both the Pharisee and the publican are represented by Christ as uttering their prayers in the Temple. The question at stake is that of humility and a man's hidden motives. In neither case does Christ assert that bad motives should keep a man from his religious obligations or that good motives excuse him from their observance.

There is an essential difference between the member of a Protestant denomination who fails to attend Sunday services and a Catholic who misses Mass. The former is under no particular obligation. The latter violates a law which the Church imposes under pain of mortal sin. Such violation, particularly if spread over a long period of time, easily can end in the complete breakdown of practical Faith. People who no longer go to Catholic services may be tied to the Church by bonds of history and blood, but their personal outlook is bound to become increasingly sceptical and indifferent. The person who tries to clear his neglect of Catholic duties with the assertion that he leads a good life, in contrast with many church-goers, is, in reality, in the position of the Pharisee, who "gave thanks that I am not as the rest of men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, as is also this publican."

At the same time the objection stands that mere external observance of Catholic practice is not sufficient to make a person a good Catholic. The sneering remark is often made: "Oh, yes, so-and-so is a good **Catholic**, but what about his practical

life? Why doesn't he pay his help a living wage? How are you going to explain the fact that he is a known grafter?"

It is difficult to give a satisfactory answer in every case to personal arguments like these. The full truth can be known only by a searching analysis of the facts. It is impossible to please everyone. Business efficiency oftens means that incapable persons must give way to those whose ability or industry is more marked. The unfortunate ones who are released, or left behind when advancements are being made, usually feel themselves to be the victims of rank injustice. It is easy to find flaws in the policies or decisions of any responsible executive and to accuse him of hypocrisy, or to assume that his religion is merely a cloak for corruption, if he happens to be a Catholic. This is obviously unfair. There is no good reason to assume that the aggrieved person is always right and the aggressor always wrong. No one has the right of putting himself up as the certain reader of hidden motives or of passing judgment which God has reserved to Himself.

Religion in Practical Life

Nevertheless it is undoubtedly true that business, politics, and the professions, have always tried to divorce themselves from religious and moral considerations. When confronted with the need of ethical principles, the business man is tempted to exclaim: "What has religion or morals to do with this? Why don't you let me alone? Let things take their own course. You can't juggle with profits and losses by introducing religion into the question. A man has to make a living. If that means adulterating goods, paying slave wages, crushing out competition, or cleaning up by starting disturbing rumors, what has God or religion to do with it? I always go to Church, and I contribute when I can. What more do you want?"

Politics has similar arguments for questionable practices. "It's all part of the system; this is what you have to do; everyone is doing it; you may as well get there first; you can't let religion stand in the way," are expressions frequently used to show that political manipulations should be lifted from the realm of conscience

and practical Catholicism. Sometimes they mean paying for votes, stealing or falsifying ballots, creating sinecure jobs, padding payrolls, juggling with taxes, letting fraudulent contracts. Often the very people who are loudest in their denunciations of high taxes are the first to cry out if an attempt is made to reduce expenses and improve governmental management by releasing superfluous and idle employees, and their only concern in voting for a candidate is whether he can land more friends in city, county, state, or federal positions.

It does not follow that politics are necessarily dishonest or that civic executives and employees are all grafters, but in many cases it is undeniable that the Catholic Church has been victimized and made to suffer by persons whose political records are totally at variance with genuine Catholic Faith. Their only purpose in making a display of their Catholic connections, by conspicuous presence at Catholic services and well-timed contributions to Catholic causes, seems to be the advancement of their own personal and political pretensions. A little investigation will often reveal that politicians whose records

are of a decidedly shady character may be "on the books" as Catholics, but they never receive the sacraments or care to meet a priest on any except social grounds, until a remorseful conscience on their death-bed prompts them to square their accounts with God.

Similar observations might be made in the ranks of professional men who maintain that they are "good to the Church." In Catholic schools of law and medicine the students are obliged to take a course in Catholic ethics, dealing both with Christian moral principles and, so far as possible, their application to practical cases. Nevertheless, many of these students have no intention of allowing such considerations to interfere with personal profits or influence their private judgment. If "good business" or "humane considerations" seem to call for an illegal operation or advice which the Church brands as immoral, or for the "fixing" of witnesses, "stringing" clients along, falsifying reports, or charging exorbitant fees, there are many doctors and lawyers who feel that ethics and religion have nothing to do with the case. "Principles and practice," they say, "are two differ-

ent things. The first are all right for priests and professors. The latter is for us to decide. "Following the mind of the Church," they maintain, "is too much trouble, and it doesn't always pay."

Need of a Catholic Outlook

This attitude of personal independence, in opposition to Catholic principles which concern practical conduct or outlook, is by no means confined to the professional classes or to fields where profits are at stake. It can be found in all groups, in Catholics who feel they have discharged their full religious duty by pledging their external allegiance to the Church and directing their devotions according to its laws. On matters which concern social morality, in particular those dealing with birth control, sterilization, experimental marriage, civil divorce and remarriage, they prefer to take their viewpoint from current literature, or to consult the resolutions of their national club; and to consider themselves as arriving at a personal conclusion with which the Church has no right to interfere. If the matter involves personal action or a state of conscience, they decide

that the Church is wrong and that it is none of the priest's business, even though it concerns the integrity of confession. "This is a matter between myself and God," they say. Later on, they learn to add, "I don't see what God and religion have to do with this matter at all. They seem so remote from the case, and, besides, I am not harming anyone in particular."

This unfortunate outlook can be traced, very often, to the lack of acquaintance with the real Catholic viewpoint and the reasons or the literature which set it forth. There is an impression current among many Catholics that the Church's attitude on vital social and moral problems is necessarily antiquated, and that questions of this kind should be settled by consulting scientific data rather than religious principles. They wish to suspend their judgment until they have studied both sides of the case. This usually means that they learn "the other side" of the question, without ever concerning themselves with an appreciation of the sources, meaning, and authorities for the Catholic side. When a discussion arises, particularly with well informed non-

Catholics, they find themselves nodding full approval to whatever is said, or crayfishing away from the subject, decidedly embarrassed and apologetic, and unable to defend or explain a viewpoint which as Catholics they are commonly supposed to understand and endorse.

Defence Versus Progress

Just how much should a good Catholic know about his religion? It is certain, of course, that strength of Faith and purity of morals are not necessarily dependent upon advanced education or always in direct proportion to it. Some of the greatest saints have been, and still are, people of little education. This is no reason, however, for asserting that the simpler people are and the less they know, the stronger will be their Faith. Some Catholics seem to have the idea that the ideal state has been reached in people who are simply devout and mind their own business, and that it is only when they become inquisitive and ask questions that they become a problem.

Catholics, it is asserted, know all that is necessary if they can say their

prayers and answer some of the most current objections against the Faith. Efforts to stimulate a more general interest in Catholic thought, and in current problems in the light of Catholic principles, are often met with the statement that "Good Catholics don't have to know these things; and bad Catholics won't be benefited by them. High-brow stuff doesn't appeal to the general run of people, and there is no use trying, through education, books, magazines, and study clubs, to make leaders and thinkers out of the people."

Of course, the absolute need for a defensive equipment of Catholic education differs greatly in various communities. Unfortunately, contentment with minimum requirements has developed in many cases a sheerly defensive attitude and a process of "question and answer" education, which, by itself, is not adequate to equip Catholics for a positive contribution to the life about them. Instead, it often creates a positive distaste for all Catholic literature and cultural movements. The idea of waiting until someone **raises** an issue or **attacks** some Catholic principle

or **misrepresents** the Catholic position, before stirring into Catholic action, is a good deal like locking the garage after the automobile has been stolen. The defensive attitude has been the plague of Catholics long enough.

It is neither possible nor desirable to make leaders and creative thinkers out of all Catholics, but Catholics are nearly everywhere thrown into mixed society in which they are a numerical minority. They are called upon to give a reason for their Faith, and they are in a position to exercise a genuine influence in society by the very fact that Catholic belief is positive, logical, and sound. The better equipped they are in the knowledge of their resources, the more secure they are going to be in the possession of their Faith, and the more certain will be the continued life and triumph of Christianity.

These thoughts are worthy of greater emphasis in Catholic schools. After receiving a standard course in secular subjects and making a fundamental acquaintance with the doctrinal aspects of their religion, students often emerge from Catholic

schools without having formed those habits of Catholic reading that are essential to their continued development along Catholic lines. It would be an interesting experiment for Catholic schools to take up a census among their alumni, to learn just what percentage of their graduates subscribe to and read representative Catholic periodicals or make any effort to keep abreast of Catholic literary productions and cultural movements. It is only through constant contact with Catholic sources that students can develop into spokesmen of Catholic thought. Is there not considerable meaning in the fact that many of the leading Catholic writers and thinkers today are converts who have achieved their intense appreciation of the Church largely on their personal initiative?

A widespread sense of confusion and discontent among the popular masses, and the spread of Communist and anti-religious propaganda make it imperative for Catholics to inform themselves in advance. The influence of the pulpit is not enough to meet the situation. There is a large and increasing body of excellent Catholic literature; and if people

can read Socialist publications and discuss world problems among themselves, they are certainly equal to the task of becoming acquainted with what is being thought and written on their own side of the fence. Here is where Catholic Action begins.

Taking Social Action

The development and improvement of national and parochial societies with definite social and cultural aims can be of tremendous aid along these lines. No Catholic who prides himself on his practical Faith can maintain an aloof or superior attitude towards the corporate life of his Church. Thoughtful observers are becoming increasingly aware that the answer to the social, economic, and moral problems of the day is to be found in Catholic principles. Many of the more pessimistic among them see no way out of present difficulties or hope for security in the future, unless Catholics bestir themselves and the Catholic Church throws a far greater weight of its spiritual influence into the field of combat.

This opens up a world of responsibility and opportunities for Cath-

olic Action. Are Catholics ready and equal for the occasion? The personal sanctification of the average man cannot be achieved by retreat from the world and consecration to God by mental prayer alone. It will have to be realized in a social as well as in a personal way—in the home, the school, the office, the factory, the street, and the field. The passive, the assimilative, and the defensive are but half of Catholic character. There must be also a positive, creative, and constructive outlook and program. This means that regular attendance at Mass, observation of Church laws, and frequent reception of the sacraments, must become, not merely a law or a counsel, but a spiritual necessity.

Genuine Catholic faith does not mean simply an external allegiance to the Church as a person might join a fraternal organization or root for a foot ball team. It means the practical acceptance of the law of Christ as the way of right living, and of the promises of Christ as a definite assurance that as a man sows in this life, so he will reap in the next. In this system, the sacraments, particularly of confession and the Holy Eucharist, are not simply rewards of virtue, much less

substitutes for it. In the well ordered Catholic life, however, they offer a genuine expression of personal relationship with God and confer the graces and divine assistance that a person needs to direct his daily outlook and the decisions of daily life in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount. Sacraments the Mass, worship, support of pious enterprises are but part of true religion. They are the fuel, the motive power. The real test comes with action.

To all who have given thought to the matter, it is clear that the conversion of the world, commanded by Christ, will never take place at the present rate of Catholic increase. It can become a reality only through a great and general enthusiasm of all Catholics, clergy and laity alike and in equal measure. The first step towards that goal is a personal question: not simply, "Are you a Catholic?" but "How good a Catholic?"

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