

Greeley Handout

from Dr. Nolan –

This is a significant essay that applies to the faithful of many, perhaps all, world religions. From the essay: “Often the latent subtext is, 'How can anyone who is intelligent and well educated believe in any religion, especially Catholicism? It is the religious sensibility behind that fanciful story that explains why Catholics remain Catholic. It might not be your religious sensibility. But if you want to understand Catholics -- and if Catholics want to understand themselves -- the starting point is to comprehend the enormous appeal of that sensibility. It's the stories.’”

Is this probably the case for most people? for most (all) religious traditions?

Is this an example of “[peasant religion](#)”?

Why should one ordained for religious leadership take years of academic preparation for their ministries? To learn to tell stories?

Should religious leaders well prepared academically recognize and accept the reality that most of their studies might be irrelevant to their role as providers of comforting (even Disney-like) stories via ritual?

Of what use is a search for truth in religion?

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Excerpts from “Why Do Catholics Stay In The Church; Because Of The Stories”

By Andrew M. Greeley

If you don't like the Catholic Church," the woman in the "Donahue" audience, by her own admission not Catholic, screamed at me, "why don't you stop being a priest and leave the Church?"

I had been criticizing what I took to be the insensitivity of some Catholic leaders to the importance of sex for healing the frictions and the wounds of the married life and perhaps renewing married love. I was taken aback by the intensity of her anger. Why did it matter so much to her that I had offered some relatively mild criticism? Why did such criticism seem to her to demand that I decamp from Catholicism and the priesthood?

"Why should I leave?" was the only reply I could manage. "I like being Catholic and I like being a priest." Later I remembered the response to a similar question by my friend Hans Kung: "Why leave? Luther tried that and it didn't work!"

Yet the question persists. In its most naked form it demands to know, "How can someone who is intelligent and well educated continue to be a Roman Catholic in these times?" The question is not a new one. It has been asked by anti-Catholic nativists for 150 years. Often the latent subtext is, "How can anyone who is intelligent and well educated believe in any religion, especially Catholicism?"

The question is worth a response, if only to clarify what religion is and what there is about the Catholic religion that explains its enormous appeal even to men and women who think that the Pope is out of touch and that the bishops and the priests are fools.

Catholics remain Catholic because of the Catholic religious sensibility, a congeries of metaphors that explain what human life means, with deep and powerful appeal to the total person. The argument is not whether Catholics should leave their tradition or whether they stay for the right reasons. The argument is that they do in fact stay because of the attractiveness of Catholic metaphors.

You can make a persuasive case against Catholicism if you want. The Church is resolutely authoritarian and often seems to be proud of the fact that it "is not a democracy." It discriminates against women and homosexuals. It tries to regulate the bedroom behavior of married men and women. It tries to impose the Catholic position regarding abortion on everyone. It represses dissent and even disagreement. The Vatican seems obsessed with sex. The Pope preaches against birth control in countries with rapidly expanding populations. Catholics often cringe when the local bishop or cardinal pontificates on social policy issues. Bishops and priests are authoritarian and insensitive. Lay people have no control of how their contributions are spent. Priests are unhappy, and many of them leave the priesthood as soon as they can to marry. The Church has covered up sexual abuse by priests for decades. Now it is paying millions of dollars to do penance for the sexual amusements of supposedly celibate priests while it seeks to minimize, if not eliminate altogether, the sexual pleasures of married lay people.

One might contend with such arguments. Research indicates that priests are among the happiest men in America. The Church was organized in a democratic structure for the first thousand years and could be so organized again. But let the charges stand for the sake of the argument. They represent the way many of those who are not Catholic see the Catholic Church, and with some nuances and qualifications the way many of those inside the church see the Catholic institution. Nonetheless this case against Catholicism simply does not compute for most Catholics when they decide whether to leave or stay.

Do they in fact remain? Are not Catholics leaving the church in droves? Prof. Michael Hout of the Survey Research Center at the University of California at Berkeley has demonstrated that the Catholic defection rate has remained constant over 30 years. It was 15 percent in 1960 and it is 15 percent today. Half of those who leave the Church do so when they marry a non-Catholic with stronger religious commitment. The other half leave for reasons of anger, authority and sex -- the reasons cited above.

How can this be, the outsider wonders. For one thing, as the general population has increased, the number of Catholics has increased proportionately. Still, how can 85 percent of those who are born Catholic remain, one way or another, in the church? Has Catholicism so brainwashed them that they are unable to leave?

The answer is that Catholics like being Catholic. For the last 30 years the hierarchy and the clergy have done just about everything they could to drive the laity out of the church and have not succeeded. It seems unlikely that they will ever drive the stubborn lay folk out of the Church because the lay folk like being Catholic.

But why do they like being Catholic?

First, it must be noted that Americans show remarkable loyalty to their religious heritages. As difficult as it is for members of the academic and media elites to comprehend the fact, religion is important to most Americans. There is no sign that this importance has declined in the last half century (as measured by survey data from the 1940's). Skepticism, agnosticism, atheism are not increasing in America, as disturbing as this truth might be to the denizens of midtown Manhattan.

Moreover, while institutional authority, doctrinal propositions and ethical norms are components of a religious heritage -- and important components -- they do not exhaust the heritage. Religion is experience,

image and story before it is anything else and after it is everything else. Catholics like their heritage because it has great stories.

If one considers that for much of Christian history the population was illiterate and the clergy semiliterate and that authority was far away, one begins to understand that the heritage for most people most of the time was almost entirely story, ritual, ceremony and eventually art. So it has been for most of human history. So it is, I suggest (and my data back me up), even today.

Roger C. Schank, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University who specializes in the study of artificial intelligence, argues in his book "Tell Me a Story" that stories are the way humans explain reality to themselves. The more and better our stories, Schank says, the better our intelligence.

Catholicism has great stories because at the center of its heritage is "sacramentalism," the conviction that God discloses Himself in the objects and events and persons of ordinary life. Hence Catholicism is willing to risk stories about angels and saints and souls in purgatory and Mary the Mother of Jesus and stained-glass windows and statues and stations of the cross and rosaries and medals and the whole panoply of images and devotions that were so offensive to the austere leaders of the Reformation. Moreover, the Catholic heritage also has the elaborate ceremonial rituals that mark the passing of the year -- Midnight Mass, the Easter Vigil, First Communion, May Crowning, Lent, Advent, grammar-school graduation and the festivals of the saints.

Catholicism has also embraced the whole of the human life cycle in Sacraments (with a capital S), which provide rich ceremonial settings, even when indifferently administered for the critical landmarks of life. The Sacrament of Reconciliation (confession that was) and the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick (extreme unction that was) embed in ritual and mystery the deeply held Catholic story of second chances.

The "sacramentalism" of the Catholic heritage has also led it to absorb as much as it thinks it can from what it finds to be good, true and beautiful in pagan religions: Brigid is converted from the pagan goddess to the Christian patron of spring, poetry and new life in Ireland; Guadalupe is first a pagan and then a Christian shrine in Spain and then our Lady of Guadalupe becomes the patron of poor Mexicans. This "baptism" of pagan metaphors (sometimes done more wisely than at other times) adds yet another overlay of stories to the Catholic heritage.

The sometimes inaccurate dictum "once a Catholic, always a Catholic," is based on the fact that the religious images of Catholicism are acquired early in life and are tenacious. You may break with the institution, you may reject the propositions, but you cannot escape the images.

The Eucharist (as purists insist we must now call the Mass) is a particularly powerful and appealing Catholic ritual, even when it is done badly (as it often is) and especially when it is done well (which it sometimes is). In the Mass we join a community meal of celebration with our neighbors, our family, our friends, those we love. Such an awareness may not be explicitly on the minds of Catholics when they go to Church on Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning, but is the nature of metaphor that those who are influenced by it need not be consciously aware of the influence. In a New York Times-CBS News Poll last April, 69 percent of Catholics responding said they attend Mass for reasons of meaning rather than obligation.

Another important Catholic story is that of the neighborhood parish. Because of the tradition of village parishes with which Catholics came to America, the dense concentration of Catholics in many cities and the small geographical size of the parish, parishes can and often do become intense communities for many

Catholics. They actuate what a University of Chicago sociologist, James S. Coleman, calls "social capital," the extra resources of energy, commitment and intelligence that overlapping structures produce. This social capital, this story of a sacred place in the heart of urban America, becomes even stronger when the parish contains that brilliant American Catholic innovation -- the parochial school.

Perhaps the Catholic religious sensibility all begins with the Christmas crib. A mother shows her child (perhaps age 3) the crib scene. The child loves it (of course) because it has everything she likes -- a mommy, a daddy, a baby, animals, shepherds, shepherd children, angels and men in funny clothes -- and with token integration! Who is the baby? the little girl asks. That's Jesus. Who's Jesus? The mother hesitates, not sure of exactly how you explain the communication of idioms to a 3-year-old. Jesus is God. That doesn't bother the little girl at all. Everyone was a baby once. Why not God? Who's the lady holding Jesus? That's Mary. Oh! Who's Mary? The mother throws theological caution to the winds. She's God's mommy. Again the kid has no problem. Everyone has a mommy, why not God?

It's a hard story to beat. Later in life the little girl may come to understand that God loves us so much that He takes on human form to be able to walk with us even into the valley of death and that God also loves us the way a mother loves a newborn babe -- which is the function of the Mary metaphor in the Catholic tradition.

It may seem that I am reducing religion to childishness -- to stories and images and rituals and communities. In fact, it is in the poetic, the metaphorical, the experiential dimension of the personality that religion finds both its origins and raw power. Because we are reflective creatures we must also reflect on our religious experiences and stories; it is in the (lifelong) interlude of reflection that propositional religion and religious authority become important, indeed indispensable. But then the religiously mature person returns to the imagery, having criticized it, analyzed it, questioned it, to commit the self once more in sophisticated and reflective maturity to the story.

The Catholic imagination sees God and Her grace lurking everywhere and hence enjoys a more gracious and benign repertory of religious symbols than do most other religions. On measures of religious imagery I have developed for national surveys (and call the GRACE scale), Catholics consistently have more "gracious" images of God: they are more likely than others to picture God as a Mother, a Lover, a Spouse and a Friend (as opposed to a Father, a Judge, a Master and a King). The story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the most "graceful" story of all -- the story of a God who in some fashion took on human form so that he could show us how to live and how to die, a God who went down into the valley of death with us and promised that death would not be the end.

How do they reconcile such gracious imagery with the often apparently stern and punitive postures of their religious leadership? It must be understood that religious heritages contain many different strains and components, not all of them always in complete harmony with one another. However, in any apparent conflict between images of a gracious God and severe propositional teaching of the leaders of a heritage, the latter will surely lose.

Consider the matter of sexuality, a subject on which Catholicism is thought to be particularly repressive. Under the grim and dominant influence of St. Augustine, the Catholic high tradition has always been suspicious of "too much" marital sex. It was all right for married people to make love for the purposes of having children, so long as they didn't enjoy it too much.

Whether this cold and harsh teaching was ever accepted by married lay people, whether in fact it was ever possible for anyone but a celibate theologian to believe it, remains open to question. But the problem did not bother most Catholics because they didn't know about St. Augustine and they learned about marital sex from their parish priests (some of whom had wives of their own), their mothers, their friends and neighbors and especially from the marriage liturgies which praised the union between man and woman as reflecting the union between Jesus and his people. The Sarum ritual from Catholic England provided a blessing for the marriage bed and for the bride that she might be vigorous and pleasing in bed -- a blessing that today we would doubtless want to extend to men. While the Anglican ritual of the Book of Common Prayer follows Sarum closely, it discreetly omits such references.

In any contest between St. Augustine and Sarum for the hearts and the bodies of the common people, Sarum was bound to win. But surely the Sarum tradition and what it stands for cannot have survived to the present, can it? Does not everyone know that Catholics are sexually repressed and that Catholic husbands and wives do not enjoy marital sex? Like a lot of other things "everyone" knows about Catholics, this happens not to be true. Or to put the matter more cautiously, while Catholics may be sexually repressed, they are on the average less likely to be sexually repressed than other Americans.

According to two different national surveys, Catholics have sex more often than other Americans, are more playful in their erotic amusements than others and apparently enjoy sex with their spouse more than do others.

Moreover if I use my GRACE scale I can account for all of the differences between Catholics and others in their sexual pleasures. Catholics seem to enjoy sex more precisely because they have more benign religious images. I do not claim that they are aware of the link between their enjoyment of sex and religious images; metaphors work usually on the preconscious level. Yet one can hardly find a better proof that religion is imagery before it's anything else and after it's everything else.

A new school in the psychology of religion, which bases itself on the so-called attachment theory of psychological maturation, supports my perspective. A happy and playful attachment between mother and baby prepares the child for similar attachments later in life, especially to God, who is in some sense a surrogate mother -- an all-powerful source of love and reassurance. Prof. Lee A. Kirkpatrick of the College of William and Mary has suggested recently that Catholicism is an especially powerful religious heritage on the imaginative level precisely because it offers so many objects of potential attachment. It has been suggested that the most powerful of all the objects of attachment is the metaphor of Mary the Mother of Jesus representing the mother love of God.

I believe that is absolutely right, although some progressive Catholics have tried to play down the role of Mary in the Catholic tradition lest it offend our ecumenical dialogue partners. Research on Catholic young people reveals that the Mary image continues to be their most powerful religious image. Who would not find appealing a religion which suggests that God loves us like a mother loves a little child? Who would not be enchanted by a story which suggests that we are, as the Chicago theologian John Shea has argued, not just creatures, not just sinners but, more than anything, beloved children?

When I was in grammar school in the mid-1930's, the nuns told a story that sums up why people stay Catholic. One day Jesus went on a tour of the heavenly city and noted that there were certain new residents who ought not to be there, not until they had put in a long time in purgatory and some of them only on a last-minute appeal. He stormed out to the gate where Peter was checking the day's intake on his Compaq

486DX Deskpro computer (I have edited the nuns' story) -- next to which, on his work station, was a fishing pole and a papal crown.

"You've failed again, Simon Peter," said the Lord.

"What have I done now?"

"You let a lot of people in that don't belong."

"I didn't do it."

"Well, who did?"

"You won't like it."

"Tell me anyway."

"I turn them away from the front gate and then they go around to the back door and your mother lets them in!"

It is the religious sensibility behind that fanciful story that explains why Catholics remain Catholic. It might not be your religious sensibility. But if you want to understand Catholics -- and if Catholics want to understand themselves -- the starting point is to comprehend the enormous appeal of that sensibility. It's the stories.

Andrew M. Greeley is a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago and the University of Arizona. His book "Religion as Poetry," on which this essay is based, will be published by Transaction Publishers this fall.