

Catholics Adrift

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Francis Sullivan AO

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Catholics in Australia have never before been so estranged from their church. Fewer than ever Catholics attend weekend mass. Attitudinal surveys of Catholics reveal a loss of credibility in church leaders and distrust of the institution.

The damage wrought by the clerical sex abuse scandal has amplified the disruption to the once established structures of meaning making and social order in our community.

Some of those features of that disruption being:

- Our mainstream institutions, including the churches, once the foundation of civil order and social control, have lost credibility, influence and trust;
- 'Individualism' is now the dominant social value and taken to extremes it undermines social cohesion, solidarity and common purpose;
- the fragmentation of social identities fosters competition and conflict, incites unrest, and undermines attempts at co-operation and common effort;
- popular support for organised religion is declining and its claims of ethical and moral certainty are weakened;
- economic and social inequalities have widened and shape political conflicts, social blight and violence;
- mental illnesses and disabilities are on the rise contributing to domestic and social dysfunction;
- climate collapse is rapidly becoming a reality and reportedly a source of melancholy and despair, particularly with younger people.

This is the context where most Catholics feel adrift from their Church. They have lost their bearings with an institution that seems out of touch with their lives. Moreover, the institution itself struggles to come to terms with its history of corruption and the concealment of crimes. It has proven itself to be too self-interested to lay any claim to being a contemporary moral beacon.

So people move on. They seek answers for their lives elsewhere. They undertake the great journey for transcendence apart from conventional religious practices, but not separate to the innate human desire for meaning, purpose and self-belief.

Jesuit theologian, Paul Crowley, calls this social phenomenon a 'time of dislocation'. Where

'the institutions that once transmitted the tradition of faith have largely lost their ability to convince'¹.

So, what actually has been dislocated? Crowley makes the following points:

- conventional mores, lifestyles and community standards have changed and become less normative, more fluid and far more encouraging of individualism, rationalism and scientific empiricism;
- "God" has become unmoored from the accepted image of the relational understandings and ways the divine was in our lives;
- the God of previous generations, once simple, interventionist and powerful has been dislodged;
- there has been a victory of evil and suffering over a distant, inexplicable God;
- what is true is no longer homogeneously held in our culture as diversity of views clouds understanding and undermines certainty;
- the enchanted worldview that God is the indisputable, the creator, determiner and judge of all things is widely challenged;
- there is now a distinct alienation between the nature of being human and the nature of God; God is no longer perceived as being a part of the natural order of things.

Crowley lands on a social context he describes as being like a pervading sense of homelessness – where people question their place within the 'bigger picture' of life and where they can find the ground for truth and goodness.

In a very real sense, Catholics adrift from the Church are homeless. This estrangement exacerbates the existential insecurity of our times. It unsettles any certainty for meaning making and conjures images of a people wandering in the desert.

The conundrum we face is that our faith is based on an incarnational reality – that being truly human is the doorway to God.

The irony, says Crowley, is that the very fact that we feel dislocated and homeless is the experience through which we encounter God.

¹ Paul Crowley SJ, *The Unmoored God: Believing in a Time of Dislocation*, Orbis Books, 2017, p.21.

As the mystics consistently say, God presents herself in the immediacy of our lives. Our quest is not to conform to another life, rather it is to live this one to its fullest.

The great Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner SJ, likened this era as living in 'winter'. A season, best described by Elizabeth Johnson:

'The luxuriant growth of devotions and secondary beliefs, all these leaves and fruits that unfurled in the season when Christianity was dominant in the culture, have fallen away. The trees are left bare and the cold wind blows.

In such a season, belief must get back to basics. It will not do to spend energy on what is peripheral and unessential, as if it were high summer.

*To survive, people of faith need to return to the center, to the inmost core that alone can nourish and warm the heart in winter.'*²

All three, Crowley, Rahner and Johnson, give weight to a spirituality that is every bit post institutional. This spirituality is the staff for the Christian pilgrim of today.

That is, a spirituality that is less to do with identification with the institution per se and more to do with embracing the revelations of personal experience.

Rahner once said, 'the externals are but the shadow of what has taken place in the depths of our hearts'.

And it is in the depths of our hearts that we pilgrims, Catholics adrift, find our way forward.

We are adrift in the ocean of creation. Not drowning but being held in a mysterious 'nothingness' that reveals itself in liminal experiences – wonder, bewilderment, suffering and love.

Rahner foresaw the Christian of the future as a mystic. I think he meant that Christian identity would be grounded in the mysterious nature of God – both elusive and intimate- found within the experience of dislocation and struggle.

Let's tease this out a bit.

As adults we have baggage, and we have desire. We have responsibilities to our life of faith and our sense of reason. We need to put energy into assimilating our wisdom accrued through life with our awakened sense of God, that is, our attention to the spiritual dimension of our lives.

In the past there was the risk of conflating our faith to what we believe, and those beliefs were often an adoption of the beliefs professed by the institutional Church.

² Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2007, p. 29.

So, when we became frustrated with the institution, we ran the risk of giving up on the more essential project of life – the desire to move toward deeper ground, a place beyond the mere adherence to a set of beliefs – that is, awakening to the mystery of God enveloping our daily lives.

If we don't make this distinction, we risk letting the purity of religious ideology replace the mystery of faith.

Therefore, if we accept that our pathway to enlightenment or spiritual awakening or religious conversion or even true Catholic practice is to seek out and follow the 'dislocated God', what does that mean?

Crowley is helpful here. He points to circumstances like:

1. Entering into a kind of solidarity with those whose suffering generates an uprootedness and dislocation at both existential and spiritual levels in their lives eg: disadvantaged and forgotten people, faith bereft people, seekers for meaning and purpose, occasions of despair and melancholy, unjust treatment.
2. Actively risk moving out of our comfort zone to purposely follow the Spirit, as Jesus did – embracing inclusiveness and nonjudgemental attitudes; adopting a contemplative practice that stalls pre-emotive decision making, question assumptions and listen deeply; place the value and worth of the stranger on equal footing or higher; orient our sense of self within the sphere of spiritual attention and definition and choose accordingly.³

These types of spiritual practice result in a sense of peace or deep confidence that turmoil, struggle, dissatisfaction, insufficiency, frustration (what the Buddha calls 'suffering') are the locale of God – they provide the instances where enlightenment can occur, where transcendence from the travails of suffering can happen, where goodness can prevail, where light marks a course and relief eases the burden.

So, despite the drop off in mass participation, Catholics remain significant contributors in education, health and social services in the community. Those services are characterised as being inclusive, representative of those they serve and contemporaneous in their acceptance of modern lifestyles and social configurations. In other words, they are relevant and attempt to put the gospel into action.

Rather than being constrained by narrow adherence to 'orthodoxy', they are sustained by the adoption of an 'alternative orthodoxy' that anchors what would otherwise be a 'people adrift'.

In practical ways this gives over to a practice as outlined by Fr Richard Rohr OFM.

³ Crowley, pp.30 and onwards.

- To adopt a stance within your Church less about being adrift and more about being 'on the edge of the inside';
- Remaining attentive to the voice of God in the liminal experiences, both of the Church and society;
- Be open to and drawn towards human suffering and frailty, not sinfulness and failure – let go of judgementalism;
- Operate without oppositional energy – bend towards engagement and relationality not factionalism and schism;
- Adopt a more mystical, not moralistic stance – celebrate the complexity of life, less rules based and restrictive;
- Promote inclusion – be proactive, accommodating, welcoming, humble;
- Become missionary rather than propositional about truths and beliefs;
- Intentionally identify with the bottom of society – fringe people, the left out, the awkward, the judged, the forgotten;
- Bring in 'the outsider';
- Articulate the 'Jesus Way' – his attitudinal stance, his image of God, his approach to goodness and honesty;
- Emphasise praxis over theory – God is an experience not an idea
- Pay attention to different things other than dogma- to nature, the poor, humility, exclusion and victims;
- Don't fight the institution just stay focused on different things – freedom of conscience, joy, creativity, nature, the poor, simple devotions and prayer, the view from the underside;
- Side with the prophetic stance in the Church rather than the priestly, institutional perspective.⁴

Catholics are adrift from the institutional church. But they are 'doing church', being the church, in direct response to community need. The fact that Catholics can imaginatively operate essential ministries in a post-modern society that are highly valued and extensively used is testament to an evolving Catholicism, invigorated, relevant and contemporary.

Little wonder the formal church runs along behind endorsing these good works!

⁴ These notes come from Richard Rohr's various presentations on his "Alternative Orthodoxy" available through the Center for Contemplation and Action.