



BAPTISM'S UNBREAKABLE BOND

Church law, of course, speaks of the possibility of “defection by a formal act,” which means a public and deliberate renunciation of Church membership; but this rarely happens. Even when it does, the person still remains “organically” joined to the Body of Christ, the Church.

This mysterious sacramental bond undergirds the old maxim, “Once a Catholic, always a Catholic,” which some regard as a form of spiritual imprisonment. It’s not. Instead, it reflects the truth that the Lord never lets go of those who entered into a loving relationship with God on the day of their baptism.

Constant remembrance of this abiding link between your children and the Church should strengthen your hope about the ultimate outcome of their lives. As such, we should never speak of them as “ex-Catholics” or “lost souls.” Nor should we plead with them to come back because they never really left. After all, laxity and confusion differ from willful departure.

Now let’s examine the statement, “I’m spiritual but not religious.”

People who say this have actually hit upon a key truth: religious observance without spiritual experience is useless. Indeed, some forms of religiosity may prevent the development of a living relationship with God.

In many cases, Catholics who now proclaim themselves “spiritual” but not “religious” have had an unbalanced and stunted experience of the Catholic faith, knowing its legal code, system of rituals and administrative apparatus, but nothing else. They have encountered the shell – “religious things” – but never the substance – a personal relationship with the God of Jesus Christ.

The Christian faith, by its very nature, needs “religious things,” which truly originate in Christ, the One who is truly divine and human, spirit and flesh. However, we may overemphasize the “religious things” while ignoring the spiritual.

Dear Father Kerper: My husband and I raised our three children as Catholics. They all made First Communion, confirmation, and even volunteered with the parish youth group. Now they rarely go to church and tell us, “I’m spiritual but not religious.” I have two questions. First, are they still Catholics? Second, what exactly does it mean to be spiritual but not religious?

Your two questions express the anguish of many faithful Catholics who grieve over what appears to be the spiritual loss of their adult children. Please know that you are not alone.

First, your children definitely remain members of the Catholic Church, so please avoid speaking of them as lost. They’re not. We must firmly believe that baptism produced an unbreakable bond between them and the Body of Christ. On the day of their baptism, God entered into an irrevocable covenant – a binding contract – with each of your children. Nothing can destroy God’s fidelity toward baptized people. Though some people may stop worshipping, engage in immoral activity or accept confused religious ideas, they remain bonded to God, who never allows human infidelity to rupture the baptismal covenant.



Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Nashua.

THE CHURCH HAS A VAST TROVE OF SPIRITUAL TREASURES

As Catholics, we may tilt toward “religious things” because they’re so much easier to explain. For example, we may feel quite at ease talking to children about Church history, marriage laws and Lenten rules but awkward and tongue-tied when speaking about our personal relationship with God.

This common skewing of Catholic preaching and teaching toward “religious things” has isolated many serious Catholics, especially the young, from the vast and diverse spiritual treasures that already exist within the Church.

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We see the bitter fruits of this unbalanced catechesis when many younger Catholics, who sincerely yearn for a richer spirituality, declare their independence from the Church and search elsewhere.

Having never known Catholic mystics like St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila and the Desert Fathers, younger Catholics may eventually discover satisfying forms of meditation and contemplative prayer within Buddhism or other religious traditions. They then happily declare, “I’m spiritual but not religious,” which may mean, “I’m finally liberated from my parents’ boring old rules and rites.”

NOT ALL THOSE WHO WANDER ARE LOST

For sure, this may cause pain. But when “lapsed” children claim to be “spiritual” while not worshipping with us or rejecting some Church teachings, we should affirm their continuing search, which may be sincere, even Spirit-directed.

Jesus, of course, touched on this precise

point. He said to Nicodemus, a seeker of truth: “The spirit blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

All baptized “ex-Catholics” have been “born of the Spirit,” and so we must trust that every spiritual impulse has something to do with God. Here the great line from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* applies: “Not all those who wander are lost.” Tolkien, a devout Catholic, always promoted joyful hope.

ALL SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE HAS SOME LINK TO RELIGION

Nonetheless, we must firmly acknowledge that God has indisputably willed the existence of religion.

Perhaps an analogy will help. In order to give water to a thirsty child, one must have a cup, bottle or some other receptacle. If the abundant fresh water of a lake cannot be brought to the mouth of the child then the water is useless. Religion is the “cup” of spirituality.

All spiritual experience, even when it comes directly from God to a person, has some link to religion, which always has some conceptual form and organizational structure.

Some new language about Catholicism demonstrates the inevitable overlap of the “spiritual” and “religious.” For example, some “spiritual” people now say, “I am post-Catholic” or “I have a Catholic background.” Yes. But whatever residue of fundamental Christian belief and morality remains in a “spiritual” person originated

in sacred Scriptures, and was passed on, perhaps imperfectly, by formal “religious education” provided by their parents and other believers. In short, all forms of spirituality pass through a religious “cup,” whether it be Catholic, evangelical, Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic or New Age.

RELIGION’S COMMUNAL NATURE SUFFERS FROM TODAY’S EMPHASIS ON THE INDIVIDUAL

How does this work?

Just as a cup gathers water into a single place, religion draws together people who share common beliefs, rituals and moral norms. This unity, which may be either very tight or lax, makes it possible to preserve and pass on common spiritual experience.

This communal nature of all religions, though necessary for the survival of the spiritual, is also the principal reason why many people say, “I’m spiritual but not religious.”

How so? Because our contemporary culture always emphasizes the individual over the social.

Spirituality, at least as understood today, is intensely personal and therefore greatly valued; religion, however, is intrinsically communal and therefore politely dismissed, or perhaps disdained. This same trend profoundly affects all types of groups: political parties, neighborhood associations, fraternal orders and so on. Most groups that promote “real time,” face-to-face contact with other human beings are in decline.

The “spiritual but not religious” formula offers Catholics a great opportunity to examine critically how we think and act. It invites us to take an honest look at our preaching, teaching and discussions with the “lapsed.”

Do we give answers to questions that nobody asks anymore while missing the spiritual longing of younger people? Do we dismiss the resilient power of baptismal grace that abides in “dechurching” and “lapsed” Catholics?

When the “religious cup” actually brings God’s “spiritual water” to thirsty people fewer people will need to say, “I’m spiritual but not religious.” ■