

A Church drowning in sentimentalism

Faith and reason are under siege from an idolatry of feelings.
[September 15, 2022](#) [Dr. Samuel Gregg](#)

Print



(Image: Matt Botsford | [Unsplash.com](#))

Whenever I teach graduate seminars, I lay down one rule for the participants. While they're free to say what they think, they cannot start any sentence with the words "I feel . . ." or ask a question which begins "Don't you feel . . .?" Quizzical expressions immediately appear on some students' faces. Then I inform them I couldn't care less what they feel about the subject-matter.

At that point, there's at least one gasp of astonishment. But before anyone can even think "trigger," I say, "Perhaps you're wondering why I'm not interested in your feelings about our topic. Well, I want to know what you *think* about the subject. We're not here to emote to each other. We're here to reason critically together."

The puzzled looks disappear. Students, it turns out, grasp that reasoned discussion can't be about a mutual venting of feelings. And that's as true for the Church as for graduates.

Catholicism has always attached high value to reason. By reason, I don't just mean the sciences which give us access to nature's secrets. I also mean the reason that enables us to know how to use this information rightly; the principles of logic which tell us that 2 times 2 can never equal 5; our unique capacity to know moral truth; and the rationality which helps us understand and explain Revelation.

Such is Catholicism's regard for reason that this emphasis has occasionally collapsed into hyper-rationalism, such as the type which Thomas More and John Fisher thought characterized much scholastic theology in the twenty years preceding the Reformation. Hyper-rationalism isn't, however, the problem facing Christianity in Western countries today. We face the opposite challenge. I'll call it *Solis affectibus*.

“By Feelings Alone” captures much of the present atmosphere within the Church throughout the West. It impacts how some Catholics view not only the world but the faith itself. **At the core of this widespread sentimentalism is an exaltation of strongly-felt feelings, a deprecation of reason, and the subsequent infantilization of Christian faith.**

So what are symptoms of *Solis affectibus*? One is the widespread use of language in everyday preaching and teaching that's more characteristic of therapy than words used by Christ and his Apostles. Words like “sin” thus fade and are replaced by “pains,” “regrets” or “sad mistakes.”

Sentimentalism likewise rears its head whenever those who offer reasoned defenses of Catholic sexual or medical ethics are told that their positions are “hurtful” or “judgmental.” Truth, it seems, shouldn't be articulated, even gently, if it might hurt someone's feelings. If that was true, Jesus should have refrained from telling the Samaritan woman the facts about her marital history.

Solis affectibus also blinds us to the truth that there is—as affirmed by Christ Himself—a place called Hell for those who die unrepentant. Sentimentalism simply avoids the subject. Hell isn't a topic to be taken lightly, but ask yourself this question: When was the last time you heard the possibility that any of us could end up eternally separated from God mentioned at Mass?

Above all, sentimentalism reveals itself in certain presentations of Jesus Christ. The Christ whose hard teachings shocked his own followers and who refused any concession to sin whenever he spoke of love somehow

collapses into a pleasant liberal rabbi. This harmless Jesus never dares us to transform our lives by embracing the completeness of truth. Instead he recycles bromides like “everyone has their own truth,” “do whatever feels best,” “be true to yourself,” “embrace your story,” “who am I to judge,” etc. And never fear: this Jesus guarantees heaven, or whatever, for everyone.

That isn’t, however, the Christ revealed in the Scriptures. As Joseph Ratzinger wrote in his 1991 book *To Look on Christ*:

A Jesus who agrees with everything and everyone, a Jesus without his holy wrath, without the harshness of truth and true love is not the real Jesus as the Scripture shows but a miserable caricature. A conception of “gospel” in which the seriousness of God’s wrath is absent has nothing to do with the biblical Gospel.

The word “seriousness” is important here. The sentimentalism infecting much of the Church is all about diminishing the *gravity* and *clarity* of Christian faith. That’s especially true regarding the salvation of souls. The God fully revealed in Christ is merciful but he’s also just and clear in his expectations of us because he takes us seriously. Woe to us if we don’t return the compliment.

So how did much of the Church end up sinking into a morass of sentimentalism? Here’s three primary causes.

First, the Western world is drowning in sentimentalism. Like everyone else, Catholics are susceptible to the culture in which we live. If you want proof of Western *Solis affectibus*, just turn on your web-browser. You’ll soon notice the sheer emotivism pervading popular culture, media, politics, and universities. In this world, morality is about your commitment to particular causes. What matters is how “passionate” (note the language) you are about your commitment, and the cause’s degree of political correctness—not whether the cause itself is reasonable to support.

Second, let’s consider how faith is understood by many Catholics today. For many, it appears to be a “feeling faith.” By that, I mean that Christian faith’s significance is judged primarily in terms of feeling what it does for *me*, *my* well-being, and *my* concerns. But guess what? **Me, myself, and I aren’t the focus of Catholic faith.**

Catholicism is, after all, a historical faith. It involves us deciding that we trust those who witnessed to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who transmitted what they saw via written texts and unwritten traditions, and who, we’ve concluded, told the truth about what they saw. That includes the miracles and Resurrection attesting to Christ’s Divinity. Catholicism doesn’t view these as “stories.” To be a Catholic is to affirm that they really

happened and that Christ instituted a Church whose responsibility is to preach this to the ends of the earth.

Catholic faith can't therefore be about me and my feelings. It's about capital-T Truth. Human fulfillment and salvation consequently involves freely and constantly choosing to conform myself to that Truth. It's not about subordinating the Truth to my emotions. In fact, if Catholicism isn't about the Truth, what's the point?

Third, sentimentalism's pervasiveness in the Church owes something to efforts to downgrade and distort natural law since Vatican II. Natural law reflection was in mixed shape throughout the Catholic world in the decades leading up to the 1960s. But it suffered an eclipse in much of the Church afterwards. That's partly because natural law was integral to *Humanae Vitae's* teaching. Many theologians subsequently decided that anything underpinning *Humanae Vitae* had to be emptied of substantive content.

While natural law reasoning recovered in parts of the Church from the 1980s onwards, we're paid a price for natural law's marginalization. And the price is this: once you relegate reason to the periphery of religious faith, you start imagining that faith is somehow independent of reason; or that faith is somehow inherently hostile to reason; or that your religious convictions don't require explanation to others. The end-result is decreasing concern for the reasonableness of faith. That's a sure way to end up in the swamp of sentimentalism.

Other reasons for sentimentalism's traction in today's Church could be mentioned: the disappearance of logic from educational curricula, excessive deference to (bad) psychology and (bad) sociology by some clerics formed in the 1970s, inclinations to view the Holy Spirit's workings as something that could contradict Christ's teachings, syrupy self-referential Disney-like liturgies, etc. It's a long list.

The solution isn't to downgrade the importance of emotions like love and joy or anger and fear for people. We aren't robots. Feelings are central aspects of our nature. Instead, **human emotions need to be integrated into a coherent account of Christian faith, human reason, human action, and human flourishing—something undertaken with great skill by past figures like Aquinas and contemporary thinkers such as the late Servais Pinckaers.** Then we need to live our lives accordingly.

Escaping *Solis affectibus* won't be easy. It's simply part of the air we breathe in the West. Moreover, some of those most responsible today for forming people in the Catholic faith seem highly susceptible to sentimentalist ways. But unless we name and contest the unbridled

emotivism presently compromising the Church's witness to the Truth, we risk resigning ourselves to mere NGO-ism for the near future.

That is to say, to true *irrelevance*.

(Editor's note, January 27, 2021: The term *Affectus per solam*, originally used in this essay, has been changed to *Solis affectibus*, which is a more accurate rendering. This essay was originally posted on October 29, 2018.)

If you value the news and views Catholic World Report provides, [please consider donating](#) to support our efforts. Your contribution will help us continue to make CWR available to all readers worldwide for free, without a subscription. Thank you for your generosity!