

Fr. Perozich comments —

This 4 part article is long and might seem to be tedious to people like me who are used to short quips and brief messages such as are given on TV and in the slogans and euphemisms which buffet our ears daily.

*I have **highlighted** a few lines which I found to be important; you may find others that you consider to be important.*

I am a priest. I am retired from pastoring in the institutional church, yet still help pastors with Mass, confessions, anointings, weddings, talks, or whatever else they request of me.

A constant exhortation of mine is to bring Jesus to everyone you meet. Larry Chapp quotes a Latin aphorism, that “you cannot give what you do not have.”

*Frequent confession, daily prayer of ACTS, adoration, contrition, thanksgiving and petition, that is intercessory prayer, the sacramental life given by Jesus, the moral life taught by Jesus, all give us what we need to **have** in order to **share** with others.*

In the traditional Mass, after the closing prayer, the priest gives Jesus to the people saying, Dominus vobiscum, (the Lord be with you) and then sends them off on mission saying, “Ite, Missa est.” Following a prayer to God, he blesses them for that mission with the Trinity.

Finally in the “last gospel”, John chapter 1, the priest synthesizes for the Catholic the essence of the mission in what the Catholic must believe about God, about what God has done for man, and what the Catholic should take to the world.

John 1, 1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him, and without Him was made nothing that was made: in Him was life, and the life was the Light of men; and the Light shineth in darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to testify concerning the Light, that all might believe through Him. He was not the Light, but he was to testify concerning the Light.

That was the true Light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world. He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not. He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. But as many as received Him to them He gave power to become

sons of God, to them that believe in His Name, who are born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (*Here all kneel.*) And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us: and we saw His glory, the glory as of the Only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. R. Thanks be to God.

Believe what you read, teach what you believe, practice what you teach. Life in the world will buffet your soul, but hold to your faith.

Evangelization in an Age of Unbelief

A good field hospital is still a hospital and not a hospice. And dealing with modern boredom with chatter about “synodal people doing synodal things” will be as useful as a defibrillator in a morgue.

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Print



**A Catholic priest in an Austrian military hospital during World War I.
(Image: American Colony Jerusalem - Library of Congress/Wikipedia)**

Wohin ist Gott? (Where is God?) — Friedrich Nietzsche

Part One: *Nemo dat quod non habet (You cannot give away what you do not possess)*

The currently raging white-hot debates in the Church are merely the eruption into full view of a deeper theological and spiritual confusion in the Church. And that confusion is the result of an almost total lack of imaginative, intellectual, artistic, philosophical, theological, and literary depth, or even curiosity, among Catholics of all kinds. And as the old Latin adage goes, ***nemo dat quod non habet*** (“**you cannot give away what you do not possess**”), by necessity the contemporary Church obsesses instead over things she does possess, such as bureaucratic structures and sexual sinners, with the former now being reconfigured in order to be more accommodating to the latter through the alchemy of synodality.

However, theologically speaking, the only thing that the Church truly possesses as her own is the crucified and risen Lord and the moral praxis of martyrial witness that following “the Lamb who was slain” entails (Rev 5:6). And it is precisely this proclamation of, and witness to, the crucified and risen Lord which has inspired most of the great intellectual and artistic achievements of the past 2,000 years. **And the Kingdom logic of this new regime of grace and martyrial charity ushered in by Christ was the only real and true revolution the world has ever seen.** All other so-called revolutions were merely permutations of either the *libido dominandi*¹ or attempts at fleeing its tyranny via the path of spiritual withdrawal and apophatic negation. **Only Christ,**

because He was truly God Incarnate in full union with a real human nature, could achieve, as St. Athanasius pointed out centuries ago, the full radicalization of creation as being most “natural” and most “worldly” precisely insofar as it is also most intimately united to what is “above.” **And what is above is the Lamb who was slain and who is now in glory at the throne of God as a slaughtered Lamb who is yet still “standing.”** Here we see the precise nature of the Christian revolution in the conjoining together of the images of butchery and glory, of death and its transformation into.

This is our revolution. Indeed, it is our only revolution. It is the revolution of a world turned upside down by the crucified God. And it is the Christ of the wooden, Roman gibbet that is the world’s only hope. As Madeleine Delbr el puts it, writing retrospectively on her time as an atheist, “... and because you were not here, the whole world seemed to me small and silly and the fate of all men stupid and cruel.”² Indeed, without Christ the world is merely a dissipated mess of competing and disordered mimetic desires³ in search of violent ways of scapegoating those who stand in our way—allegedly—of possessing all the shiny objects of our totemized idolatries.

But, of course, **death is the final barrier that casts a shadow of futility over all such worldly schemes.** Death is the ultimate boundary and therefore we seek to overcome it either by accepting it with an “adult” and “stoic” indifference to our lives—an indifference nobody ever really achieves—or to overcome it through some kind of Titanistic and Promethean effort in which we seek an ersatz immortality via grand achievements which evoke an everlasting memory in those who come after. But monuments fade or are sprayed over with the graffiti of later

vulgarians and soon enough we are all forgotten. Quoting Delbrêl yet again:

The great, indisputable, reasonable misfortune is death....

Revolutionaries interest me, but they have misunderstood the question. They can arrange a better world; we will always have to move.

Scientists are a bit childish. They still believe they kill death...; they kill ways of dying: rabies, smallpox.

Death is doing just fine.⁴

It is only in the resurrection of the crucified Christ that the world can transcend the regime of death. What does St. Paul mean when he says in Corinthians that the “sting of death is sin” (1 Cor 15:55)? He means precisely that most of our sins are rooted in our awareness of the finality and futility of death, which causes us desperately to seek some kind of happiness via the false intimacy of a purely worldly fulfillment, which leads to all of the sins of concupiscence, which are more than just sins of the flesh. But death is also a form of intimacy *and indeed there is nothing more intimate to us than our own death*. But the resurrection destroys death and thus robs sin of its sting from within.

This is the Christian revolution. It is the revolution of a new intimacy which alone slakes our entire thirst for the *ek-stasis* of love. And it is a love which alone has no boundaries and no limits, and which cannot be transgressed by being trumped by something “more” or “higher.” There is no greater enlightenment than the wisdom

this intimacy brings and no greater joy. This is the intimacy of a fullness of life that transcends the stale categories of the “Law,” as St. Paul points out. It is an intimacy that does therefore contain an antinomian rejection of the purely forensic and juridical elements of the moral law in favor of the new *nomos* (“law”) of love that is in many ways more binding—as love always is—than “mere morality,” which is, in many ways, the point Jesus was making in the Sermon on the Mount. “Mere morality” is about an obedience which knows only that a “rule” has been imposed. And “mere rules” always provoke transgression. **The true morality of the Sermon on the Mount is an ethic of resurrection intimacy under the tutelage of the formal logic of love, which is a new law that liberates.**

Part Two: Modernity as transgression and nullification of the possession

But this revolution has run up against what is perhaps its greatest challenge: the strange contours of unbelief in the modern world. My claim is that ours is a culture predicated upon the nullification of God as a “really real” existential option. Our disbelief is different from the atheism and agnosticism one often found in a premodern context. Previous generations saw fire-breathing atheists like Nietzsche, who still took the faith seriously enough to engage it, and whose dark protests against Christianity gave a back-handed witness to the ongoing importance of the question of God. **Our era by contrast merely yawns at the faith and treats it like a quaint, antiquarian curiosity perpetuated by a shrinking congregation of ignorant dullards who just don’t get that modernity and its science have killed that dragon.** The world has “moved on” from that “God thingy” and now considers those who even raise the question to be anti-social and dangerous obstacles to the latest iteration of technological “progress.”

Therefore, the atheism of today is not overt and is more of a **de facto atheism of praxis and what the French call a *mentalité*, grounded in the belief that even if some kind of “ultimacy” exists, that it is largely unknowable and unprovable and is, therefore, best left to the side of the road as the technological revolution grinds inexorably forward.** The modern world still allows for a certain measure of what we call “religious freedom” so long as that freedom stays well within the boundaries of its dog kennels of domesticated and neutered impotence. “Spirituality” is allowed to remain as a kind of feel-good oozing of gnostic emotions signifying nothing more than a kind of “health aid” to inner calm and better tantric sex. And it is a spirituality that fits nicely with a de facto cultural atheism in a consumeristic register since its “church” is the boutique shop at the mall that sells essential oils, CBD products, books on better living through Yoga, and various disgusting tasting green liquids made from exotic plants grown only in Bolivia.

And it is this view of the Abrahamic religious believer as a dangerous obstacle that is the only remaining way that our culture takes us seriously. **The rise of a totally transgressive culture devoted to the erasure of the last vestiges of tradition, natural law, classical morality, religion, sexual mores, and the very concept of “boundaries” has nullified the God linked to such things as an ongoing concern.** Augusto del Noce made this point repeatedly as he presciently foresaw the linkage in modernity between the nullification of transcendence, its sublimation into a new religion of a secularized immanence, and the project of the transgressive erasure of all that has come before us.

Thus, as the sociologists say, the “plausibility structures” of our culture have created within all of us a deeply attenuated

religious sense in the old-fashioned manner of the spiritual soul seeking its fulfillment in a transcendent God. The wisdom that comes through the putting on of the mind of Christ fades into the mist of our foggy indifference. In order to see God through the lens of Christ, one needs the spiritual eyes to do so. And yet, our plausibility structures have given us all spiritual cataracts that make impossible any genuine spiritual insights without the greatest of efforts.

And because of the ascendancy of the culture of transgressive nullification, one of the biggest problems we face in engaging our culture is the fact that the well of discourse has been poisoned from the get-go. By that I mean that **the very living water we are attempting to give away is rejected tout court from the start as a toxic brew of benighted superstitions that were already tried and found wanting. We have “had our day” and now it is passed and nobody wants what it is we are selling.** We are, in the eyes of our world, the religion known for witch burnings, the Crusades, the Inquisition, Galileo, and having too many kids. We are the religion of anti-choice, anti-freedom, and anti- ... everything. We are the religion of *nyet*, which bids us to cry with the saints rather than to laugh with the sinners. We are history’s wet blanket and are a perpetual buzzkill to life’s simple material pleasures.

Part Three: The unbelief of the believers and the form of modern sanctity

Of course, all of these cultural realities affect the Church and her ordinary members who must swim in this culture every day and are deeply affected—both consciously and subconsciously—by the formal logic of modernity’s plausibility structures. Therefore, my further

claim is that even if faith exists in the souls of most ordinary Catholics (and I think it does), it remains nevertheless true that **the roots of such faith are shallow in many believers, which has led to the modern spectacle of the unbelief of the believers.** Joseph Ratzinger noted this phenomenon already in 1958, where he pointed out that most of us in the pews these days are closeted “heathens” masquerading as believing Christians, which is what led him to predict a mere ten years later that the future Church would be much smaller, lack social standing, and have to undergo an agonizing period of retreat from its former Constantinian glory.

In other words, even among those who still profess some semblance of the faith, **there is a loss of the sense of intimacy with Christ with a consequent loss of a sense of participation in the cruciform structure of His existence.** There is therefore also a deep, deep alienation from the core evangel of the Church amongst millions of Catholics and a deep sense of meaninglessness, loneliness, depression, and despair. We want to believe, but find we cannot, and yet we do believe. It seems therefore that the strange structure of specifically modern forms of faith are actually forms of a deep, smoldering, even at times searing, unbelief, but an unbelief that has been transformed, via the crucible of a true desire for God, into a kind of faith that stretches outward toward God as a destitute beggar who has been stripped bare of all pretensions.

We can escape our culture’s illusions to a great extent and with great effort, but, like the wounds of Christ, the scars remain with us and the religious ties that bind remain loosely affixed. Thus, there is emerging an entirely new form of sanctity born out of the negating nullifications of modernity, and it is giving birth to entirely new kinds of saints. The sanctity of vicariously suffered unbelief—a form of crucifixion—transformed into the martyrial

witness of unbelief conquered from within. And it is a conquest which brings enormous and manifest joy. And it is a faith and a sanctity which is most truly at home in the worldly world as a full participant and with eyes wide open.

It is essentially a lay form of sanctity, but it is also a form of discipleship that I think an increasing number of priests and religious are drawn to. And that is because **the modern bourgeois parish is in crisis—a crisis of faith that mirrors the deep cultural unbelief—and this crisis afflicts priests as much, if not more, than the laity.** What this means is that many Catholics today exist in a deeply ambiguous relationship with the so-called “institutional Church.” It is a relationship that can be characterized as the typical parishioner being an “insider” insofar as his or her Mass attendance is relatively consistent and yet, nevertheless, on the level of emotions and existential commitment, an “outsider.” This too is an alienation from intimacy, only in this case it is an alienation from the Christ who comes to us in the Sacraments. Much has been made of the Pew research that shows that a majority of Catholics in the United States no longer believe in the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. And much hand-wringing has been done about the need, in the light of this, for better catechesis and preaching. But even though that is all well and good (and it is), it does not address the deeper phenomenology of what is happening here. And that is the crisis of alienation from intimacy with Christ via the Sacraments of the institutional Church because that **Church has not recognized the agonistic and secularized aspects of the faith of most average Catholics. It has not recognized the alienation nor that many Catholics are actually psychological outsiders to the Church, even if they sit in the pews every Sunday.**

There are indeed still reasons for hope, but it will require more than the tired categories of most Catholic responses to modernity up to this point to be truly authentic. Radical traditionalism, Catholic progressivism, and standard form Catholic conservatism, all fall short of the mark in various ways. None of them are radical enough, which means none of them actually understand themselves all that well. **Lacking a true Christocentric, cruciform radicality, traditionalism is not nearly traditional enough, Catholic progressivism is not progressive at all but simply the parroting of intellectual fashion, and standard form “conservative” Catholicism is simply Whig-bourgeois liberalism at prayer.** They all have their strengths and weaknesses, and they all have sincerely devoted Catholics within their ranks. Better Catholics than I am, for sure. But as a response to the nullification of God in modernity and the deep culture of disbelief, they are all shadow boxing failures.

Part Four: The *Ernstfall* response

I have no “program” or “strategy” for the best way forward in our evangelization. And that is because this is not something that can be “thought out” in advance in some ersatz committee and published as a series of documents from the bishop’s conference, as if the spiritual crisis we face can be met through the development of new bureaucratic maneuverings. The solution is going to have to bubble-up from below as new saints emerge and new forms of sanctity are inspired by the Holy Spirit in ways that elude anything that can be captured in “listening sessions.” We face what Balthasar called our “Ernstfall” moment of Christian witness, which means a moment of decisional crisis in which **we must choose what form our sanctity will take in today’s world of a nullified God. And that will require a**

true listening to the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ and not the whisperings of the zeitgeist on superficial hot button issues.

Therefore, the true revolution can only be recovered—as it has always been recovered—by the emergence of the creativity of the saints. And if we look carefully at the Church over the past century, we see the tell-tale signs of a sanctity that is evincing a clear preferential option for life in the world and solidarity with that world, even while being a mere sojourner in that world—a “pilgrim people” as Vatican II put it. It is a sanctity in the world but not of the world and for the sake of the world. As David L. Schindler put it, we exist in “The heart of the world” but precisely as “from the center of the Church.”

However, there has also been a certain tension in the rise of this new form of lay sanctity. Sanctity often has rough edges, is provocative, and frequently takes the form of a “re-wilding” of Christianity as it seeks to make the faith “weird again.” Balthasar correctly pointed out that **“to be concentric to Christ is to be eccentric to the world.”** But the spiritual profligacy, exuberance, and re-wilding weirdness of these new forms of sanctity are quite often at odds with the anodyne anesthesia of large swaths of the Church in the West.

Thus do we see a double alienation from the modern parish. On the one hand, you have the millions of “insider-outsider” Catholics as I have described, but you also now have the alienation of those Catholics who desire a more radical form of Christian life that takes the form of being both in the world and yet radically different from the world. Call these Catholics whatever you want—avant garde Catholics, back to the land Catholics, dive bar Catholics,

bohemian art colony Catholics, urban homesteading Catholics, classical education and homeschooling Catholics—the fact remains that their attempts at re-wilding are often at odds with the suburban, techno-affluence, and spiritual boredom of standard life in our parishes.

Christopher Altieri, in an insightful **article** in *Crux*, takes note of the repeated insistence of Pope Francis and his ecclesiastical allies that the Church needs to be “welcoming” to everyone. We are told endlessly that the Church is a “big tent,” a “field hospital,” and is open to one and all and that God loves you “just as you are.” Of course, these are all true statements on their face. But Altieri notes, correctly in my view, that all of this rhetoric misses the deeper issues at play in the modern world—issues I have attempted to outline here—and that there is a much deeper question that modern people are asking.

What we need now is to address their burning question: **Why should I bother with the Church at all in the first place?**

This question is the critical one and is often overlooked in these discussions. As Altieri states, it seems as if Pope Francis is **fighting the battles of a long ago and bygone era of Catholicism. Where is this “rigid” and “pharisaical” Church of which the Pope so often speaks?** Where is this alleged hyper-judgmental Church of finger wagging moralizers obsessed with sexual morality? Where is this alleged hyper-scrupulous Church of moral bouncers barring folks from the Communion line? If it exists, it must do so in parts of Western Catholicism I have not seen.

The pastoral reality is the opposite in fact, and the typical person is not so much concerned with “am I welcome in this Church?” as they are with the question, “What is attractive and interesting to me about this Church?” Boredom is the deeper existential threat to our parishes—boredom with an utterly non-provocative Church constantly chasing after the latest boutique shop issues—and this boredom with the Church is grinding her down.

George Bernanos described this modern boredom of the believer as long ago as 1937 and his young Curé in *The Diary of a Country Priest* says at the very outset: “My parish is bored stiff; no other word for it. Like so many others! We can see them being eaten away by boredom, and we can’t do anything about it.”

Boredom, not “exclusion,” is the existential cancer that is eating away at the Church’s vitals. And in my view no amount of synodal listening, or any other form of bureaucratic ecclesial navel gazing, is going to ameliorate this boredom. It is a boredom that is far darker than the “dark night” of a believer in the grips of spiritual acedia. This is the boredom of a cultural nihilism with a consumerist happy face masking the despair that is smoldering in the embers. And “listening sessions” are all well and good. But listening to what exactly? And to what end? A good field hospital is still a hospital and not a hospice. **And dealing with modern boredom with chatter about “synodal people doing synodal things” will be as useful as a defibrillator in a morgue.**

Sadly, it does not seem that Pope Francis is much interested in this point of view. But there must be scores of bishops in the

Church who understand the nature of the pastoral crisis of the “insider-outsider” Catholics who are slowly drifting away. Where is their voice? **Are we still so locked into a superficial piety of papal immunity from criticism that these bishops cannot speak out without fear of serious repercussions?** St. Paul opposed St. Peter to his face and told him he was wrong about the circumcision party. We need bishops who will tell Pope Francis that he is wrong about the pastoral needs of our time. That people are begging to be challenged and given a faith of deep substance that demands something of us.

That is an issue for another day. But it is an issue that needs to be examined carefully for the theological nuances of our theology of the papacy and whether or not it is somehow “disobedient” to the Pope to ever criticize him publicly.

(Editor’s note: This essay was **first published**, in slightly different form, on September 5, 2023, on the “What We Need Now” (WWNN) Substack and is posted here with kind permission of WWNN and the author.)

Endnotes:

¹ Often translated as “lust for power” or “lust for domination.” In *City of God* St. Augustine references the *libido dominandi* as a central characteristic of the city of man, wherein fallen man covets ever greater created strength so as not to be dependent upon God.

² Quoted in *The Dazzling Light of God: A Madeleine Delbr el reader*, p. 12.

³ See the work of Rene Girard.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-24.



About Larry Chapp [47 Articles](#)

Dr. Larry Chapp is a retired professor of theology. He taught for twenty years at DeSales University near Allentown, Pennsylvania. He now owns and manages, with his wife, the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker Farm in Harveys Lake, Pennsylvania. Dr. Chapp received his doctorate from Fordham University in 1994 with a specialization in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. He can be visited online at "[Gaudium et](#)

[Spes 22](#)".

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