

Why am I still a Catholic?

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Through neo-natal baptism I was initiated into a religious tradition without my explicit consent. In one sense I've spent my life trying to make sense of that early religious membership. In the most fundamental sense I am still a Catholic because of my parents' faith. From infancy onwards it has been a powerful support in my own search for religious meaning. It provided me with the basics for a vocabulary of prayer and introduced me to Catholic liturgy, festivals and celebrations. My early experience of the Catholic faith often involved boring and repetitive practical activities. In hindsight they provided a secure foundation and perimeter from within which I tried to make sense of my own life as a child and teenager. I grew up in the late 60's and 70's in a world where religious symbols, morning prayers, nightly rosary, grace before meals, and mass attendance punctuated my home and school life. When I talk to friends now, I realise that I was very lucky as I don't remember experiencing religious belief and practice as overtly oppressive or inhibiting. It was just a fact of life. In a way there was something comforting about the predictable rhythm of Catholic liturgical life.

In my home my parents embodied two very different types of Catholicism. My father was sincerely reverential and unquestioning of all things Catholic. His Catholicism was motivated by the desire to preserve official Catholic teaching and was full of absolute certainties, prescribed ritual and moral prohibitions. My mother's Catholicism was far more open-ended and critical. She was excited by a post-Conciliar Catholicism that embraced the world and recognised the need for change. The fact that parents with such radically different outlooks could both be legitimately at home in the Catholic Church gave me a glimpse of a Catholicism that was broad and inclusive. Diversity of opinion and practice is part of the fabric of Catholic life. I certainly experienced it in my home at a microcosmic level. I began to see from an early age that debate, disagreement and heterogeneity are facts of life in the Catholic tradition and a vibrant Church is a Church where these flourish.

When I left secondary school it seemed perfectly natural to pursue studies in theology and religious education. Like most adolescents I was addicted to questioning things and I certainly questioned my own Catholic identity. In my late teens belonging to the Catholic Church was like walking around in uncomfortable, ill-fitting, second-hand clothes. I hadn't chosen this faith tradition for myself. It was my parent's faith more than my own personal commitment that kept me attached to the Church. I saw theology as a means of asking questions and searching for answers that would make sense to me. Catholic theology is sometimes prematurely dismissed as abstract, uncritical and irrelevant. I experienced it as an intellectually rigorous and challenging discipline. Theology helped me to begin to think about my own faith in a way that was not divorced from life. I am not a Catholic because of any one abstract theological formula but theology has certainly helped me to think through my struggling faith and to learn from others, including those of no faith or those of different faiths.

Christian faith is centred on a personal relationship with God made incarnate in Jesus Christ. Personal relationships are at the heart of my Catholic faith. People all around me sustain me in that faith. I'm thinking of quiet, unacknowledged, generous people who live in my community and witness to their Catholic faith and values in countless ordinary ways. In the early Church all baptised members of the ecclesial community were called saints. I like the usage of the word saint for the ordinary person who lives out their faith in the world around them. I know so many saints who give constant witness to the gospel values of love and justice by the way they live as carers, parents, workers or friends.

My Catholic faith is inter-generational. Like a runner in a relay race, I received my faith from my parents and now I am handing it on to my children. The experiences of falling in love, getting married, and having children are such spiritually-laden experiences. Belonging to the Catholic faith community is especially important to me as a parent. This is not just a middle-age conservative backlash. Having children forces me to question my values and goals. I am now the one making the baptismal faith commitment for my children. I want them to have a sense of the sacred, of the dignity of all human life, of the loving incarnational presence of God. I want them to have a sense of justice and social responsibility. In truth they nourish my faith incessantly as they act out a nativity scene at the school

play or marvel at their bedtime stories of the creation or ask me questions about God. They catechise me more than I can ever impart faith to them.

Catholicism comes from the Greek phrase *kath'holou*, meaning 'according to the whole', and has connotations of universality. The Catholic religious family should be characterised by inclusivity and welcome. Yet the ideals presented in the gospel values of Jesus Christ, the love, justice and the joyful awaiting for the coming of the kingdom, are often blatantly at odds with the incomplete and broken life experienced by many members of the Catholic Church. Hans Kung speaks of the un-church, the underbelly of the Church, which is evident in shameful activities such as anti-Semitism, indeed wherever the Church fails to live up to the gospel values and its own teaching. The un-church occurs where great injustice is perpetrated in the name of the Church. The Catholic Church is far from perfect. One need only mention the Ryan report and Catholics can hang their heads with shame. The treatment of women within the Church and a host of other painful issues highlight the chasm between the actual and the possible. Given all of this then 'Why am I still a Catholic and why have I chosen Catholic faith for my children? I believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ and I think that the Catholic Church's struggle to live out this gospel is worth being a part of.