



FRANCIS SULLIVAN. Why stay?

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Since the conviction of Cardinal Pell I have been asked why I remain a Catholic. It is an obvious question. The extent of criminal behaviour and the active cover up by bishops and religious leaders of perpetrators has been breath taking. Ordinary Catholics have been played as mugs by the Church leadership. Why stay?

My answer is why not! The abuse scandal has rocked my confidence in the clericalist management of the Church but not my sense of the collective journey I walk with other Catholics. I believe the “assembled walkers” are the Church! I feel no compulsion to leave them. I feel participating in a faith community a vital aspect of my self expression. Being Catholic for me is less a religious tag or a member of a religion and more a chosen pathway of personal and spiritual discovery best undertaken in community. It is my way of living the Gospel.

I have found deep comfort in and direction from my faith tradition. I feel nurtured in the sense that I am part of a pilgrim people, ever moving into a better understanding of the divine in my life and an appreciation of what that means for me as person in society.

The clerical sex abuse scandal is a crisis primarily about the culture of the Church. It may well cause some to rethink their beliefs and practices, but for me it has been a call to deepen my spiritual practice. To commit to daily meditation and reflection. To draw on the sacramental life of the Church and the richness of scriptural practices like lectio divina. It has been a time to become mature in my faith development, less dependent and literally more adult in my engagement with the institutional Church.

I have benefited by being raised as a Catholic and being involved in social and spiritual apostolates of the Church. I have found the wisdom of the teaching and spiritual tradition a rich source of inspiration, information and discernment.

At the same time I understand that participation in the Church is a continuum of engagement. For some the Church is a mainstay or safety net providing moral and social certainty. For others it is more a launching pad for confident and competent engagement come storms or calm waters.

So if others are asking whether it is worth hanging in there with the Church I say now is the time for lay Catholics to claim their rightful place within the organised expression of the Church. If nothing else the scandal has demonstrated the massive power imbalance that lays at the heart of the institution. The clericalism, so bemoaned by Pope Francis, has delivered an institutional structure too top heavy with clerics, company men and time servers. It has relegated the interests of lay people to a sad second after the organisational demands for financial sustainability, orthodoxy and the maintenance of social conservatism.

Being Catholic has always been a mix of the identification with a religious tradition and a personal integration of faith and reason. When this development is healthy Catholics gain confidence of their place in the Church and become more articulate in the revealed truths the faith. The abuse scandal has clouded the atmosphere for Catholics but not the imperative to seek the Beyond and join with others in pursuing truth, goodness and beauty.

I believe the wisdom of the Gospel tradition has much to offer post modern society. Not as a bulwark against secularism or a last bastion of traditional values. More as a font for personal freedom and agency in a society that prizes human rights and autonomy. A reclaiming from the Catholic tradition of the primacy of personal conscience would be no small thing in how Catholics navigate life with its competing philosophies, social narratives and identity politics. For to be Catholic is to be attentive to how our society becomes more human, more compassionate and creative in prizing the dignity and inherent value of everyone. Virtue ethics is far from being outmoded and prudence in discerning our times and circumstances remains an essential life skill.

For me that makes my faith real, practical and important. It compels me to be less self centred and precious. It implores me to move from my comfort zone to places that open my spirit and hopefully my heart. It shows me that God is forever creating and I can participate in that. So, why leave?

These days I am energised by a spirituality that seeks to promote human flourishing. This is a far cry from my childhood catechism, with its obsession over sin and undertones of a judgemental and exacting God. For today's Catholics an authentic spiritual pathway does not need to involve a constant struggle to deny healthy instincts and desires. We can and should celebrate the embrace of love as it arrives in our lives and not demonise human nature when it presents inconveniently or challenges us to rethink our set ways.

This spirituality leads to an ever deepening acceptance of my self as the place God comes to me. A self centeredness that by its nature is expansive and transcendent. It gives religious expression in that it personalises the way forward in someone like Jesus and seeks to search for an evolving depth to our reality in a consciousness named as Christ. This is my catechism today. If I have that wrong then so be it. If it means somehow I have drifted from elements of the institutional Church, or they have left me, I can live with that. Otherwise let's stay and keep going!

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