

Response

More on the faith of Plante's Catholic

I am moved to respond to the opening commentary in your January issue, on David Plante's *The Catholic*. I ceased active participation in the liturgical and social life of the Catholic Church some twenty or more years ago, but never have had the willingness/intellectual honesty/guts/bravery/commonsense ... take your pick ... to formally dissociate myself mentally or spiritually from being a Catholic. For the past few years I have found myself wanting to 'come home' (the Hound of Heaven?) but haven't been able to come to a sense of tolerant disagreement with the trappings and authoritarianism which seem to define—when all is said and done—what the shape of 'home' still is. As I told someone recently, I have very little faith in Roman Catholicism, but unbounded hope for it. The Creed presents few problems; the Code and Cult, however, are still causes of profound anger and disenchantment for me.

In my attempts to rebridge the gap, I have discovered a vast difference between contemporary Catholic theological and sociological scholarship and the realities of the faith resident in the communities of adherents known as the (American) Roman Catholic Church. I think that one should reasonably expect that the post-Vatican II 'believer' would have a clearer picture of what it means to be part of the People of God, and a more universal view of the fundamentals of christianity, the essentials of the Faith which define and give shape to the uniqueness of what it means to be a believer in and a follower of Christ. I do not find this disposition to be *generally* true among younger (American) Catholics. In fact, I find this fundamental knowledge more lacking than I do in pre-Vatican II educated people.

The post-Vatican II adherents have been socialized quite well into Roman Catholicism: they have a sense of the ethics, whether or not held to be a value in their lives, and they are attuned to a more active participation in the liturgical life of their parish ... if they attend regularly ... vapid though that liturgy may be as practised in the main in the (American) Church. The more committed of them have a sense of social conduct and the need for an active presence of 'right conduct' and attitude toward the poor and oppressed of the world ...not necessarily in their own immediate environment, however. All of this is quite admirable, as far as it goes. However, they don't seem to have a clear idea of the essence of Christianity which will carry them through when they become disenchanted with some aspects of the forms into which

they were born and acculturated. Ask the average 'fallen away' (most of whom have not gone on to membership in a different denomination) why (s)he left and it usually turns out to be disaffection with one or more elements of the 'Roman Catholicness' of their lives, not some essential disagreement with the tenets of Christian belief. But what happens when they really don't have an internalized identification as a Christian to fall back (forward?) to in order to maintain the necessary momentum in life's pilgrimage? I have found that they will usually say that they are Christian, but basically don't have a clue as to what that means.

Your question: 'Are we offering something hopelessly cerebral?' deserves a Yea and No answer. Much of contemporary theology which causes such consternation among the Ratzingers of the world may be inconsequential to the life of the People of God because it is indeed so cerebral and divorced from the realities of people's lives. Unless one is a well-trained theologian, who really understands...and cares about...the nuances of the writings of Küng and Schillebeeckx? Matthew Fox borders on being incomprehensible! On the other hand, the abject failure to evangelize the faithful in the past twenty or more years has resulted in a non-cerebral approach to the Church in the overwhelming majority of adherents. One cannot expect an ongoing momentum in an organization of non-believers, particularly with the local level of priests and religious seemingly so preoccupied with their 'self-actualization' and with trying to maintain their sense of leadership within an increasingly (secularly) well-educated laity. All of the socialization and liturgical conditioning in the world cannot begin to be a substitute for a belief grounded in knowledge, conversion and faith. It seems to me that this is the issue which really has not been seriously addressed in the contemporary Catholic Church, American or otherwise. Power, privilege and control still determine the course of so many issues which preoccupy the minds and hearts of people who deserve and need so much more.

'(Or) are the committed ranks of the laity, as much as the clergy, getting dangerously out of touch?' You asked that question in the context of one set of issues. I resoundingly answer in the affirmative with respect to a more essential context.

Jim McCrea
California, U.S.A.