

Christian Education**'Where Did We Go Wrong?'**

First in a Series

By FATHER WILLIAM J. O'MALLEY, S.J.

Because it is my main job, I have looked at the sad state of so many young people who have "left" the Church today and, more than any parent I know, I've said, "What did we do wrong?"

Even the most conservative and liberal extremists in the Church find themselves in unusual agreement on the problems: many young people begin in high school to chafe against attending Mass; once they leave home, they cease attendance altogether — which suggests that their only motive for worship all along has been sheerly external: fear of parental sanctions or hurt feelings. Furthermore, many are disinterested in or openly hostile to any opinion of an organized Church as ipso facto reactionary, irrelevant or old fashioned.

But have they really "left" the Church? One's baptism doesn't disappear after so many Masses missed. Admittedly, one has to continue to pay his dues at a country club to remain a member, and one would think a Catholic would have to reaffirm the commitments of his Baptism at the Eucharist at least frequently (even if not weekly) to be considered still a member.

But we are not talking about a club here; we are talking about a family — the sons and daughters of God. The criterion is not the paying of dues. Even if the son never writes home, even if he ignores the needs of his parents, he is still a son — however prodigal. The non-practicing Catholic has not left the Church any more than such a son has left the family. The reason is simple: he cannot. In the image of One who knows, they are not ex-members; they are strays.

Let us be rid of those clabby, institutional, corporate images which seem to imply that if one does not attend Mass he is no longer in the family. God created saints for thousands of years before Baptism or Mass existed, and grace is not given on a "members only" basis. Hearing that, however, many youngsters reply, "Fine! If good non-Catholics can make it without Mass, so can I!" And "make it" usually means merely avoiding a (debatable) hell way in the future. This indicates, once again, that they, too, have limited themselves to the institutional images of the Christian community: dues, meetings, memorized rules, exclusivity, blackballing.

They do not seem to see themselves — in any way — as sons and daughters, or as members of the super-living Body of Christ, or as the communal Spouse of God. They heard those descriptions of the Church many, many times, but somehow they never truly registered. One factor may be that the reality they encounter in the everyday Church so belies the ideal. Another factor may be that they heard those explanations so much earlier than they could understand them, that they built up a resistance to them by the time they could have become meaningful. Still another reason may be that, despite those explanations, their parents and pastors used only the institutional images when it came down to actual practice: "you'll go to hell," "what will people think," "the pope says." Finally, let us all admit that the institutional images are far easier for our pragmatic minds to deal with — lines of authority, bylaws, penalties — than the seemingly more "airy" images of People of God, Body, Spouse. Memorizing rules is easier than understanding the love of God and neighbor.

Most of the "stray" members of our family still do believe in God. What they reject is not God but the organized Church as a means to express and enrich that belief. They don't comprehend the inexorable logical consequences of that belief: gratitude, service, worship.

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This rejection results from a whole complex of factors — not merely from the disappearance of the catechism as a pedagogical tool nor from the doctrinal flabbiness of religious educators.

All would agree that a major cause of the disruption in the Church in recent years is the disappearance of uniformity. There was a day when all priests gave the same doctrine and penances, or they were silenced. Outside the home, the primary focus of one's identity was the neighborhood and parish. It was reassuringly clear-cut, simple, uncomplicated.

The major flaw in this nostalgia is that one can't go home again. Even the prodigal son returned home to a new situation. We can't recreate the Church of 1948 or the Church of 8 A.D. simply because the world in which the People of God must now work has changed almost beyond recognition, just since the disciplined and frugal years of World War II.

We cannot deny the triumph over our children's minds by materialism and its salesmen, who have billions of dollars for propaganda against our loaves and fishes. They offer in our very homes — freely, without control, every five minutes — promiscuity, self-aggrandizement, and above all covetousness and greed. The Enemy is the same as he was in 1948, but now he has metamorphosed into a very slick, powerful, attractive and omnipresent Friend. He entertains us each night — all for the small fee of listening for two minutes out of every 15 to his doctrine of acquisitiveness.

If Booth Tarkington wrote *Seventeen* today, he'd have to call it *Twelve*. We are dealing with a very politely skeptical group of youngsters now, who feel they've been bamboozled once too often — by their parents, presidents and popes. As a result, from puberty onward, a teenager's greatest fear is being "uncool," taken in, hoaxed. And one has problems getting a cynic to make an act of faith.

For better or ill, as individuals and as a Church, we have grown up. The warm and reassuring Catholic "ghetto" is gone. For all kinds of reasons — some apostolic, some self-serving — we have adapted to the pluralistic society in which we live. On the one hand, if we had refused adaption for the sake of aloof uniformity, the missionary Church would have been as apostolically ineffective in America as the Hasidic Jews. On the other hand, though, our concessions to Caesar and materialism even in our parishes and schools have threatened the credibility of the root Christian Message; God is more important than any creature, and our brothers and sisters are more important than our own self-protectiveness.

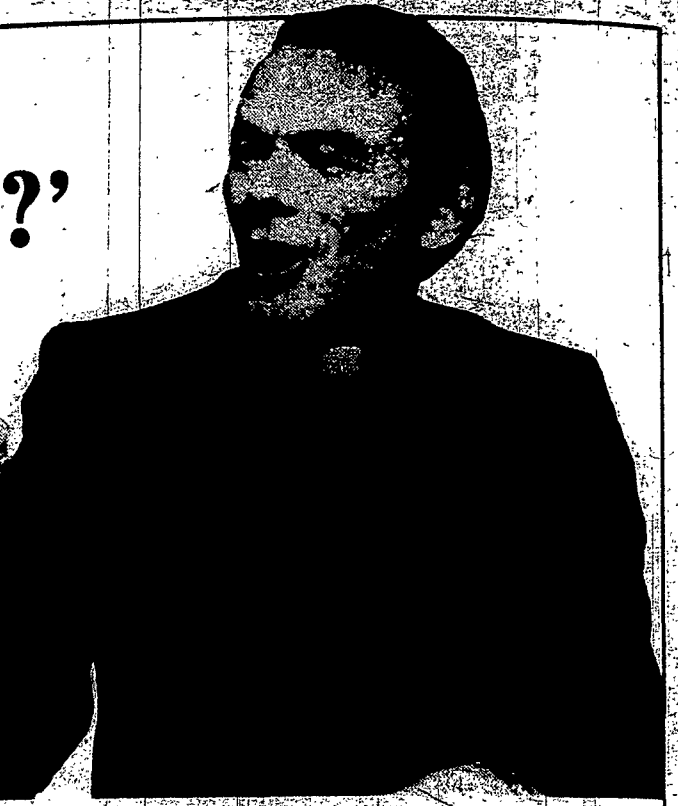
Orthodoxy is easier in an insulated ghetto. But when our Founder sent us out into the world, he sent us out to cope with pluralism — what the Hebrews coped with in Canaan and what Paul coped with in Corinth. Since the morning of Pentecost, the Church has foresworn the coziness of the enclosed Upper Room.

But in the de-ghettoized, pluralistic society to which we are sent, one's act of faith in Christ and His Church must be freely and autonomously chosen, or else it cannot survive the assault of so many other powerful and contrary points of view. One cannot survive in a debate at NYU or Berkeley with nothing more than an uncritically memorized and accepted catechism of answers. It is not their memorized, literalist quotations of scriptural chapters and verses which make the fundamentalist student crusades so successful today; it is the manifest joy and enthusiasm of their lives and their love for Jesus. Whatever brings back our "strays," it must be as powerful to them as the thousands of hours those same children have been taught to covet — beginning before they were old enough to read. Is the love we show for Jesus and his Church as powerful as that?

It is foolish to blame this softness with pluralism on Vatican II. We can "blame" only our Founder who sent us out into the uncomfortably diverse highways and hedges, and on St. Paul who was comfortable with "Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free." As long as one grappled to himself the heart of the Gospel, everything else could be discussed, even — and especially — the structures of religious law.

One other major problem which resulted from this emergence from the womb of Catholic uniformity is the painful loss of symbols. Our identity is predicated not only on our differences from "them" but also on our visible identity with one another. Just as a McQuaid senior is secure in his identifying letter-sweater and the "Knight" on his bookbag, the Catholic used to have a whole galaxy of symbols to reassure his sense of Catholic identity: medals, rosaries, novenas, benedictions, copes, monstrances, and on and on. Now, alas, these symbols are gone.

But let us remember: the Jew still fervently worships Yahweh even without the unifying symbol of his long-ago Temple. We can worship him, too, without copes and cathedrals, even without churches. We did it in the catacombs and in jails all over the world for 2,000 years, when Christian faith was more important than Christian symbols. The symbols are important, but they are only



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of secondary importance; what is primary is the relation of God and his people. The Church existed before the symbols; the loss of the old symbols is not a loss of the reality they attempted to embody.

However, leaving behind our old and genuinely lamented uniformity and clearly visible identity involved a far more serious loss: the "old" Mass was very often a truly mystical experience, for the individual and for the group. It responded to a genuine awe and wonder within us in the presence of the overwhelming God who had become one of us. The Latin, the choirs, the rich vestments served a very real and uplifting function. But here, too, there were self-deceptive flaws. The Latin Mass was uniformly unintelligible to all but a few; the choirs made Mass an essentially passive experience; the rich vestments belied the Message of its Founder, who was content with a feedback for his first monstrance.

Many found to their surprise, however, that in making the Mass intelligible, we have made it — in very many instances — dull. Its effectiveness now depends not on the arts of Palestrina and Cellini but on the heartfelt belief and unselfconscious sharing of the priest and the congregation.

If Vatican II exposed any weaknesses in the modern Christian community, it was perhaps that the symbols had taken on a much too sacred reality of their own, a reality so strong that it could mask a half-hearted faith life. Stripped of the symbols, we were left with the reality: God and us.

If we have a drain of young people from the visible Church, is the major reason the over-institutionalizing of the Church? The lack of the old uniformity? The skepticism of today's young people? Their brainwashing by materialism? Our adaptation to pluralism? Or is it really the flaccid inner faith life and the self-protectiveness of those our children sense in the pulpits and pews?

NEXT WEEK: Strategies.