

The Church 1979

By Father Andrew Greeley

Hard to Be A Catholic In America

What have I got against the "guidelines," everybody wants to know. After all, they are just a way of seeing that those who receive the sacraments are "properly prepared" to receive the sacraments.



My problem, I guess, lies in the words "properly prepared." Who is to say what is preparation for a sacrament and when that preparation is proper. If the American guidelines were imposed in Italy or in France, there wouldn't be any marriages or confirmations or baptisms. Who decided that it was harder to be a Catholic in this country than in those countries?

So what I have against the guidelines is that they are an attempt to force people to be Catholic and an attempt to impose a single model of what "Catholic" is. The guideline enthusiast priests and bishops tell Catholic lay people, in effect, "we know what a Catholic is and unless you measure up to our definition of Catholic, you can't have the sacraments!"

What appalls me about this new "canon law" is not only that it is far more rigid than the existing code, it also violates the rights which Christians are guaranteed under the existing code.

So, too, the relationship between God and a human "soul." God works on the soul with grace and through the Holy Spirit -- or to use less exploitive terms, God expresses his love to the soul through grace and through the Holy Spirit. The nature and the faith of the invitation and response in such a divine love affair varies from person to person. In one state of the "romance" for a given person, love may not be revealed in any church attendance at all, while for another person it might be revealed in daily communion reception. Unless the scriptural injunction "Judge not that you be not judged" has been completely repealed by the guidelines maniacs, nobody but God and perhaps the individual person is capable of judging how the soul's love affair with God is developing. You cannot budget the Holy Spirit's time by administrative guidelines. He still blows whither he will, ecclesial functionaries to the contrary notwithstanding. Nor can you measure out the flow of grace on a six month or six week schedule. Nor, finally, can you reduce the love between God and the human person to a single model, a rigidly clericalist model at that.

Who is a Catholic? The code takes a very minimalist position, as I understand: you are Catholic if you were baptized a Catholic and have not formally left the church. Furthermore, if you are a Catholic, you have a right to the sacraments. The guidelines maniacs, however, have a much more narrow and rigid definition of Catholic and are cheerfully ready to deny the sacraments to those who don't measure up to their definition. I am against the guidelines because they are

an attempt to impose a single model of being a Catholic; and an uncanonical model at that on everyone in the American church and constrain the Catholic laity to honor that model or be denied the sacraments to which they have a right. I know of no more gross violation of human rights going on anywhere in the Catholic Church today.

As far as I can figure out, from both the scriptures and Christian traditions, faith is a gift and it is also a love affair, a relationship between a human being and God remarkably paralleled by the relationship between a man and a woman. Such relationships, as anybody knows who has been in one or watched one, have a dynamic and a process of their own; their growth can neither be constrained nor accelerated by external pressures.

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