

“LOSING MY RELIGION”: THE TRAGIC CASE OF APOSTASY

With 85 million records in the books, the 1990's rock group R.E.M. had some incredible hits (“Everybody Hurts”), in no small measure due to the haunting anthems of its enigmatic lead vocalist Michael Stipe. R.E.M. was popular when I was teaching high school, and in my attempt to be relevant, I at least feigned interest in the contemporary music scene. So, I was both intrigued and saddened when listening to arguably their biggest hit, “Losing my Religion.” While not intended as a snub to a traditional Judeo-Christian worldview, but rather a song about unrequited love and being at the end of one's rope, its effects were far reaching. It is increasingly the case that young people describe themselves as **spiritual and not religious**, and the song “rang true” for many young people searching for meaning.

The loss of faith is one of the most painful experiences imaginable, whether for a parent dealing with a young adult child, a victim of abuse whose faith in God was shattered, a childhood friend or sibling. Sometimes, the decision to abandon the faith is more deliberate and calculated, not the result of some serious trauma. This column completes a brief three-part series on heresy, schism and apostasy. To be guilty of **apostasy**, one must essentially **abandon the Christian faith** completely. It never refers to one who merely questions the meaning of life and faith, nor even one who dissents from one or more of her teachings. It is far more drastic even than that. Technically, apostasy is the **complete repudiation** of the Christian faith, and as such carries with it the most extreme Church sanction (excommunication) for those who do so with full knowledge and volition. If a once practicing Catholic abandons the faith and embraces Buddhism or Islam, that is clearly an example of apostasy.

The phrase first came to be used in the early Church, when Christians were accused of apostasy against pagan society. They were threatened with execution if they did not bow down and offer incense to the gods. If they caved, they then faced the wrath of some other Christians. Soon enough, the term came to be used of Christians who abandoned the faith. Obviously, the specter of a **threat of execution** wreaks havoc with one's free will, so strong is the duress under which such a decision is made. When the apostates whose lives were spared later wanted to return to the faith (called *lapsi*- the lapsed), a monumental struggle ensued in the early Church. Some offered incense, others acquired a libellus (a certificate) proving that they had complied, while still others handed over sacred books to the authorities. It ran the gamut, but the extreme rigorists didn't want the apostates back—ever!—leaving their forgiveness to God alone.

Etymologically, apostasy comes from two Greek words *apo*, (“from”) and *stasis* (“standing or position”). It connotes **giving up one's standing**, deserting one's station in life, one could say. Our Catholic faith is a **precious gift** worth protecting and nurturing. Sadly people leave, though most do so by quietly fading from the scene. In order for one to formally separate from the Catholic Church, several **specific things** need to take place. It cannot simply be an angry whim: “Father delivers lousy homilies and then went and changed the Mass times...I'm outta there!” No, people don't typically do that. But they do leave in anger, though they may feel quite differently a few years later. In Germany, hundreds of thousands sought their removal from Baptismal registers in an attempt to avoid paying the “Church tax.” Anyone who was baptized as a child is automatically a member of that Church by law and is charged a percentage of their income, regardless of whether they practice the faith.

A **formal act of leaving the Church** requires more than a request to have a name removed, as in the case above. According to a 2006 document of the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts, it requires three distinct steps: a) the internal decision to leave the Catholic Church; b) the realization and external manifestation of that decision; and c) the reception of that decision by the competent ecclesiastical authority. The document states, “It supposes, therefore, **an act of apostasy, heresy or schism.**” In that case, an explicit mention of the occurrence of a “*defectio ab Ecclesia catholica actu formal?*” would be noted in the individual's Baptismal Register, at the parish of his or her Baptism. Ouch! While it is not easy to formally leave the Church, for all intents and purposes many do. But here is the catch. No matter what you think, say or do, you **cannot be unbaptized**. The Church simply does not recognize, quite rightly, any mechanism whereby one could annul his or her own Baptism, the sacrament that incorporates us in the Church. Baptism confers “an ontological and

permanent bond which is not lost by reason of any act or fact of defection.”

When we speak of the “rupture of ecclesial communion,” we are really saying that the person has broken the bonds in three key areas: faith, sacraments, and pastoral governance. They no longer believe what the Church teaches, cease to participate in the sacraments, and no longer adhere to Church governance. Those are the bonds that undergird our relationship with the Church. There is a big **difference** between long-term absence from the practice of the faith and defection (formal or otherwise) from the Church. One of the greatest joys as a priest is celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation with someone who has come back to the faith after many, many years. It’s “hauling in the big fish” and it is wonderful! May Holy Week do just that— increase our faith and God-willing, **bring others back** to the Church. We want to welcome you back graciously and sincerely! May God bless you all this Holy Week.

- At bulletin press time (Tuesday noon), the storms were coming, looking like April showers will turn to snow. Please check our website for updates about the Chrism Mass (if postponed from Thursday) and our Holy Week Mass and confession schedule.
- It was great to see visitors to the Cathedral from each of the teams in the **Final Four**. I am impressed that fans staying in Minneapolis hotels ventured to Saint Paul to join us for Mass. Those kids from UVA are sharp cookies! **Virginia** is among the **highest ranked** public universities in the nation—only 27% of applicants are accepted. Congratulations to the Cavaliers!
- New guidelines were just released for former Anglicans seeking to be Catholic priests. Key points: the men may be married at the time of their Catholic ordination, and if necessary, they may engage in a secular profession. Anglican-use parishes are typically small and may not be able to support a full-time priest. Thankfully, such is not the case here. But if I **had to take a job** to make ends meet, perhaps I could land the job making all the flight/hotel arrangements for the Twins! I’m a detail guy...and free tickets to boot?
- We are especially in need of men and women (age 17 years+) to serve as Lectors and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion at our Saturday and Sunday evening Masses. Training is provided— please consider lending a hand.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector