

## Questioning

Kate Childs Graham | Apr. 23, 2009

Besides college, the only other time I went to Catholic school was in kindergarten. At St. Thomas Aquinas School, we went to Mass once or twice a week (It was 20 years ago, so the details are a bit fuzzy).

Before one particular Mass, I decided that when everyone was standing, I would sit and when everyone was sitting, I would stand.

Now, one could certainly see this as a five-year-old testing her boundaries, which is probably what it was. However, looking back, I would like to think that I wasn't only seeing how long I could pull the stunt off, but that my five-year-old self was also actively questioning.

After all, no one had ever explained to me why we stood or sat during different parts of the Mass. I did it because that is what I was taught to do, because that is what everyone else did.

I am not sure that I ever inquired as to the "why," but if I did, the conversation might have gone something like this:

Me: Why do we stand at certain parts of the Mass and sit at other parts of the Mass?

Adult: Because that's the way we've always done it.

Me: But why?

Adult: Because certain parts of the Mass are so important that we need to stand.

Me: But why?

Adult: Because that's how it is.

Me: But why?

And so on.

I had pretty respectable religious education - at home, at school and at church. However, while it was packaged differently, my religious education was not very far from the Baltimore Catechism. There wasn't room for dialogue or for finding my own truth. There were answers to questions and stickers when you memorized another prayer and that was about it.

There was no questioning.

My fear is that my questioning-less religious education is reflective of a bigger trend in our church. Our church - the Catholic church - has forgotten how to question. Question our doctrine. Our tradition. Our leaders. Our beliefs.

To me, this seems strange. We are a church built on questioning, built by questioners. St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, Julian of Norwich, St. Claire of Assisi - to name a few - were all questioners. In their time, these thinkers and others asked innumerable questions, trying to be closer to God, trying to be better Christians.

While we now have a lot to learn and cling to from the likes of St. Augustine, this certainly does not give us license to stop questioning. After all, St. Augustine was philosophizing in the 5th century and plenty has since changed. Surely then, our questioning must continue in order to find answers that respond to our modern world, our modern church.

Unfortunately, many questioners of our time are being excommunicated or censured. After a five-year investigation of his book *Jesus Symbol of God*, Jesuit theologian Robert Haight has been forbidden to publish or teach by the Catholic hierarchy. For their views on women's equality in the church, Fr. Roy Bourgeois, Sr. Louise Lears and others have been reprimanded by the Vatican. Fr. Marek Bozek and Call To Action members in the Lincoln, Nebr., diocese were excommunicated for questioning. The list goes on.

Worse yet, those folks in the pews who begin to question, feeling no space for dialogue or change, are fleeing the church. Between 2006 and 2007, the U.S. Catholic Church lost 400,000 members. In fact, one of the largest religious identities in the United States is "former Catholic." Surely, these statistics are reason enough to open the floor for questioning and dialogue.

So, the big question then is: Why have we stopped questioning? Or, maybe it is: Why is it that the hierarchy of the Catholic church no longer condones questioning? Or, maybe still: What is there to lose by questioning?

Historically, when leaders have allowed and encouraged questioning, they have left themselves open for criticism, change and possible loss of power. And sometimes, that has scared the very same leaders into cutting off all dialogue.

Take an example from within the church, the (abridged) story of the Papal Birth Control Commission. Pope John XXIII appointed a commission to evaluate and study Catholics' use of birth control. When John XXIII died, Pope Paul VI continued the commission and expanded it to include married men and women. Although the commission overwhelmingly came out in support of birth control, Paul VI, fearing that if he permitted birth control, he would lose power as a moral authority, favored a minority report and upheld the Vatican ban on birth control.

The moral of this story is simple: We cannot be afraid, the leaders of our church cannot be afraid of questioning and subsequent change. Indeed, the act of questioning is what has and can make the Catholic church a truly just church.

In short, when a five-year-old asks us, "Why?" Let our answer never be, "Because." Instead, let us ask the child and ourselves, "Well, what do you think?"

*Kate Childs Graham writes for [ReligionDispatches.org](http://ReligionDispatches.org) [1] and [YoungAdultCatholics-Blog.com](http://YoungAdultCatholics-Blog.com) [2]. She also serves on the Women's Ordination Conference board of directors and the Call to Action Next Generation Leadership Team.*

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