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The indelible mark and a new faith journey

Chase Nordengren | Jun. 21, 2012 Young Voices

Prior to the revisions to the Roman Rite last year, English-speaking Catholics proceeded the Eucharist by praying that God might deliver us from evil, grant us peace, keep us from sin and "protect us from all anxiety." These, one might argue, are the necessary prerequisites to receiving the sacrament with singleness of heart: protection from sin and evil, peace and freedom from anxiety.

In my faith life, anxiety was the prayer's hinge. Anxiety and depression, diseases for which I'm now seeking treatment, have been a subtle part of my life for as long as I can remember, and a part of my faith life for at least the past decade. I've often joked with friends that to be a liberal Catholic is to have two kinds of guilt constantly at odds with one another.

My liberal guilt, or anxiety, as a member of the Roman Catholic Church is fairly common to authors on these pages. I've been routinely disappointed in the church's failure to acknowledge the personal and emotional ramifications of its positions on the role of women and homosexuals in faith life. More important, however, was choosing how to act on this critical disposition.

The inspirational work of the hundreds of progressive Catholics I've met in the peace and church reform movements, all of whom I admire, some of whom I'm fortunate to count as friends, provides a strong example of how to maintain fidelity while promoting justice. Some of that work has been loud and public, but much of it happens in private and in small groups. Perhaps the last barrier to the spiritual corruption of any church is the work of those of conscience to act as Christ amidst fear and hurt.

The collision of the liberal and Catholic anxieties, however, is what has ultimately forced me to leave the Catholic church. The war within my spirit that these forces caused followed me from conservative to liberal parishes, from college to career, from Mass to contemplation, and even from the world into retreat. Such conflict was deadly to a vibrant faith life. It utterly debilitated my ability to grow in Christ.

The formal act of defection from the Catholic church, recognized in canon law from 1983 until 2009, was abolished by Benedict XVI in the motu propio Omnium in Mentem [1]. The act, designed to release the defector from the obligation to marry in the Catholic church, was deemed ambiguous and complex in practice.

"Theologically," argues canon lawyer J.D. Flynn [2], "we understand that what makes us Catholic is our Baptism or our reception in to the Church. Whether we want to be Catholic is not germane to the question of whether we are Catholic. Whether we follow the teachings of the Church or not is not germane to the question of whether or not we are Catholic."

Losing my formal ability to define myself, it would seem, should have made me angry. Truth be told, I wanted to be angry. Yet a part of me acknowledges the truth to which Flynn speaks. Irrespective of my current feelings of distance from the church and many of its teachings, my sacramental identity persists. Much like my anxiety, which will remain with me my entire life and enable both the best and the worst of my character, so too I could never fully abandon or forget the spirituality that has sustained me for nearly 15 years.

This fall, I will be formally received into the Episcopal church, under the spiritual guidance of a vibrant and welcoming church community. The editors here have graciously allowed me to continue with you explicating our common faith. As religious transformations go, mine feels almost inconsequential. More accurately, it is additive: the Christianity I affirm, the individual faith, is constructed from both past and present.

Anxiety is a disease one must constantly remind oneself one has. It is easy in the heat of any moment to forget that the dread and confusion that routinely confront the anxious mind do not fairly reflect the way things really are. That entirely unique invocation in the liturgy of my childhood and adolescence, one prayed with and for me by hundreds of faith communities and of which I have to remind myself every day, that "joyful hope," is what I will most fondly remember of this first stage of my spiritual story.

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